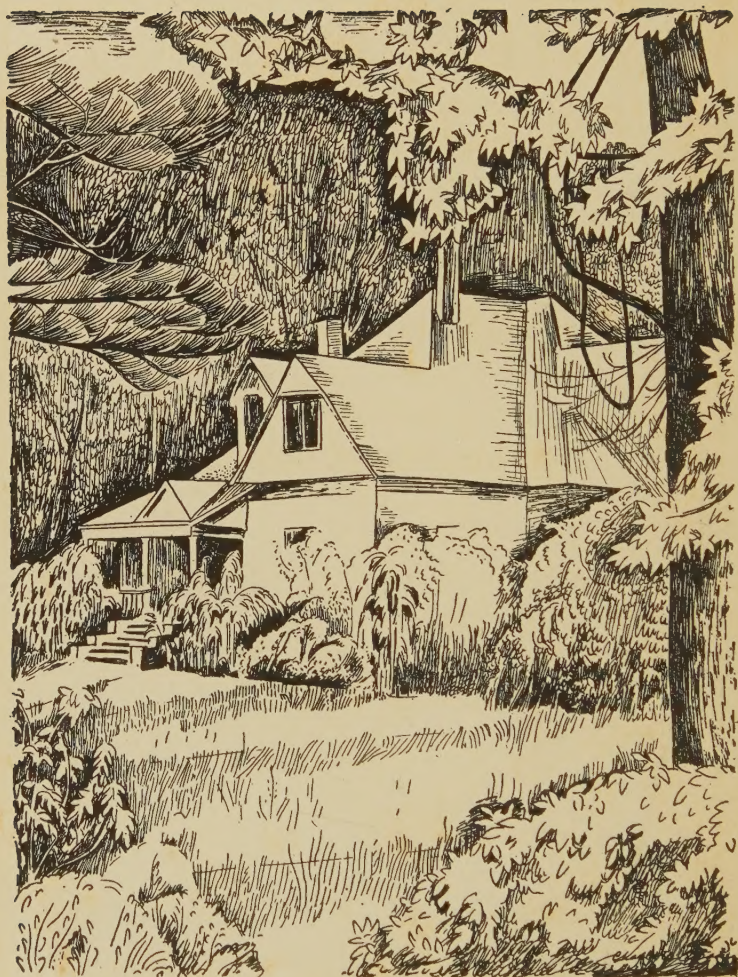


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Birds of Tanglewood
by
Karle Wilson Baker



THE BIRDS *of* TANGLEWOOD

By

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Illustrated by

CHARLOTTE BAKER



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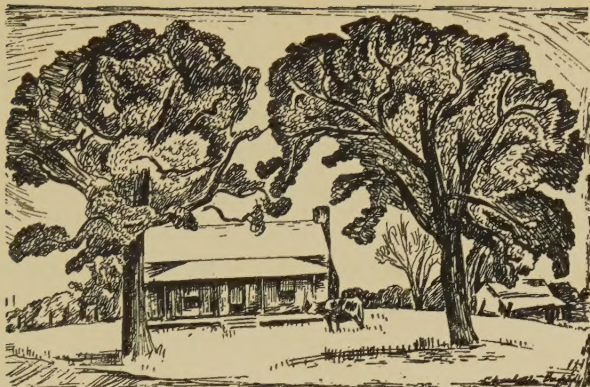
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TO THE MEMORY OF
MY FATHER AND MOTHER
THE BUILDERS OF THE VANISHED
"TANGLEWOOD"

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CHAPTER I

THE BIRDS OF TANGLEWOOD

My introduction to Tanglewood was concerned with thrushes. It was a tangle of grape-vines and underbrush and great forest trees, which my father had just bought in the little town to which he had lately moved. Before that, they told us, there had been a pond in the midst of it, where the boys came to shoot the wild ducks that came down for water and rest on their long flight to the Gulf in November. He had drained it and fenced it, but left it otherwise unchanged; and when I first came from college to live in the little house across the street, the birds had no knowledge of its change of ownership. They went on singing and rioting and nesting there just as their ancestors had done through immemorial summers, untroubled by perplexities as to whether it belonged to France, to Spain, to one Sam Houston,

to the Republic of Fredonia, or still to the friendly Tejas. All had claimed it at one time or another, but my own conviction is that the wood-thrushes were and are the rightful owners of the place.

In those days I knew only the mockingbird and the jay, and one or two others that had frequented the suburban dooryard of my childhood; but that haunting aerial note quickened my dormant aspirations, and before long I acquired a bird-book and a field-glass. Many delightful hours they brought me, and much delightful lore; but neither of them ever enabled me to ticket and classify the especial potency of that incomparable song. Morning and evening, and often beetween times, all through the long days of my first Texan summer, we listened to that cool, fresh, unearthly note coming like a disembodied loveliness from the green tangles across the street. We identified the song, from its musical notation, long before we ever saw the bird. Indeed, I do not remember seeing him until after the little house across the street had been abandoned, and Tanglewood, necessarily somewhat chastened, but still preserved as nearly as possible in its natural wildness, had become our home. Then I was surprised to find that, as birds go, the wood-thrush is not really shy. He is secretive in regard to his nest; for more than fifteen years he has been arriving in early April and departing in November, and still I only know that the nests—for there must be two or three—are built in one of the great pin-oaks in the far corner of the yard.

For some reason, I have never made any especial effort to find them; perhaps from a half-conscious desire to let the mystery remain undisturbed in that dusky corner of the yard from which floats oftenest the strange and lovely song. For, oddly enough, the thrush does not look the supreme poet that he is. When I first saw him, I was conscious of somewhat the same shock I suffered when I saw somewhere the statement that Pater was short and stout, with a wart on his nose. (That bit of information may be apocryphal, but the shock, at least, was authentic.) Omitting the wart, the description fits my thrush. He looks (think of it!) *middle-class*. Of course he himself does not really know what a dreadful way that is to look, nowadays, for he is not really modern. But it is true. He has not the trim and dashing grace of the mockingbird, that worldling among the birds, nor the splendid insolence and swagger of the cardinal, that gorgeous imagist. No, the thrush *looks* sleek and contented; plump, alert, and intent upon worms. During business hours, strangely enough, he is the Average American; it is only in the seclusion of his green and leafy leisure, alone in the first dim glory of the morning or audibly shedding his earthly cares at dusk, that he ceases to be a round little bird with a splotched and mottled breast, and becomes a mere and holy voice. "William tired himself hunting an epithet for the cuckoo," says Dorothy Wordsworth; and "wandering voice" was as near as he could get. I am sure that William would have tired him-

self equally over the wood-thrush. "Serene" and "ethereal" are the adjectives oftenest used by those who try to give the effect of his song. Sara Teasdale says that he "twirls three notes and makes a star," and that is lovely and true; but it gives the holiness and remoteness of his song without giving its nearness, its earth-quality—the part of it that suggests mosses and fern-roots and the little flowers that grow in the shade with their feet in the water. "Bell-bird" he is called, too; and the thought of bells does come nearest to suggesting his quality. For bells belong to both sky and earth; gathered from the clouds, their music, yet scattered down, like holy water, from man's aspiring but laborious towers. A bell-bird is my thrush; and his campanile is the tallest pin-oak in the corner of my yard.

I might revise my estimates if I should hear skylark or nightingale, but, next to the thrush, the finest poet among my birds is the bluebird. Indeed, as to fineness, he does not need to take even second place. The thrush is greater, that is all; more masculine, more completely master of that "high seriousness" that enlarges while it subdues the soul. But for pure ethereal delicacy and suggestiveness, for a quality that is elfin and spiritual at once, there is no note like the bluebird's. Its ventriloquistic character helps the effect: the fact that you never know quite where to place it, whether it is far or near; that you look until it seems as if it were merely some delicate hilarity of

the air; until you half believe its source invisible. And then, if you suddenly find him on a fence-post just across the road, what a thrill of delight to find that, for once, the enchantment is in no wise dependent upon distance! For in all the world there is not anything more enchanting than that incomparable color of his coat, set off in such delicious fashion by the ruddy brown of his breast, just the color of the ploughed fields. And his little song, so simple and yet so inexhaustible, so heavenly and yet so dear, is not in the least roughened or sharpened or coarsened by his nearness to your very elbow. A bluebird could continue a hero to generations of valets.

Children have "favorite colors," "favorite birds" and "favorite flowers." Then, as we grow older, and are assailed on all sides by the multifarious and diverse charm of things, we tend to outgrow this childish exclusiveness, and to let our affections flow out in all directions, loving a multitude of things each in its own way for its own especial quality. Later, I think, we tend to come around the circle again, and, as many things reveal their exhaustibility, while others serenely refuse to be exhausted, discrimination succeeds the early exclusiveness of our passions, and we find ourselves able to love one best among many well-loved things. Be that as it may, I have at last achieved a "favorite bird"—the bluebird. I think the reason he has come to be definitely the dearest where so many are dear, is that I find so heartening the

renewed delight of knowing that anything so common can be abidingly so delicate, so discrete, so spirit-like and strange.

Sad to say, while I live at Tanglewood the blue-birds will not return my devotion. For a little while very early in the spring, while Charlie, the man-of-all-work, is ploughing up the ground for our little amateur vegetable-garden, or turning the dead leaves under in the flower-beds, they come and perch on the wires and posts, darting down after the worms they are so quick at seeing. But as soon as the leaves are out, giving all of Tanglewood that gracious, roofed-in aspect that makes its especial virtue for Southern summers, they are off to the busy fields of some real farmer. In vain I have put up boxes, and even *gourds*; they like fence-posts and open places, and do not like trees. I must be content to listen for their soft sky-music on my morning and evening walks, and to increase my skill in finding it, so that I may catch a glimpse of the heavenly coat as it flies.

One of the commonest birds of Tanglewood, of course, is the mockingbird. He is to the Southern park and dooryard and roadside what the robin is to the North. And it seems unreasonable, no doubt, to rank the bluebird, with his short, casual song, above this most famous of our singers. But the trouble with the mockingbird is that he lacks temperament. He is a worldling; and no worldling can be a great poet. His song has brilliancy and bravura, but it lacks tenderness and charm. He has stupendous technical

ability; he is the Paganini of the birds. He is sophisticated, where the thrush is experienced. His song is always a delight; but there are only two occasions when, to my thinking, it rises above brilliant jubilation and reaches true magic. One is in September, after the ardors and ecstasies and labors of the nesting-season are over, his brood reared and gone, and he is shedding his summer feathers and growing his winter coat. Then he sits in the fading tree and sings his moulting-song. It is soft and tentative, touched for once with pensiveness, yet sweet and confident, as if he were thinking over his loves and labors, and saying to himself, "Spring has gone, and summer. Lovely summer and spring! But they will come again." The other is when, at various seasons, you hear him singing in the night. He is more thoughtful and tender then; even his brilliancy attains a strangely thrilling quality, as his crystal-clear cadenzas trickle down the black silence like a brook sparkling down a deep, ferny glade. He indulges most in this nightingale-habit in the early spring; but I have lain between my blankets in late October and listened to him, shrill and clear out in the cold moonlight, like a voice from some unfamiliar world that knows no pain. Sometimes, indeed, even in his nocturnal performances, his cleverness gets the better of him, and he indulges most brilliantly in the mere technical gymnastics and shrewd mimicry that delight him in the daytime. One night, about eleven, I heard a mockingbird begin to sing in a tall tree near my window; and for quite a

long while I listened to his program of impersonations, undisturbed by the usual distractions of daytime sound. I detected imitations of the cardinal's note, and the wren's, among others, very distinct and several times repeated. Lanier, I think, calls him the Shakespeare of the birds; but the clever fellow, to my thinking, does not earn the lordly epithet. His imitations, while undeniably successful, fall short of the originals. No, he is not Shakespeare; he is some brilliant but inferior dramatist whose every character is colored by his own personality; he does not achieve the rich intensity of the cardinal, nor the lyric innocence of the wren. As an artist, he is one of the dazzling second-raters.

But, personally, he is charming. I know of no bird more genuinely elegant, or, in his worldly way, more distinguished. The *svelte* lines of his gray coat, the dainty white flutings of his buoyant wings, his habit of running over the ground, swiftly and gracefully, instead of hopping as do more ordinary birds, his pretty trick of singing as he flies, spilling careless music—all make him an inimitable and much-desired neighbor. He has force of character, too. He is one of the most regular patrons of our bird-baths; and disappointment awaits the insufferable little sparrow or the bullying jay who thinks to disturb him at his bath. He holds his own manfully; he is no mere dandy and aesthete.

His odd cousin, the catbird, is one of the most characteristic birds of Tanglewood. Neither so striking

nor so interesting as the mockingbird, he is somehow an arresting sort of personage. He is so like the mockingbird in build and general appearance that one might fancy him, with his sooty cap and elegant slate-colored coat, a sort of shadow of his more brilliant kinsman. And he moves like a shadow, slipping among the leaves as silently and stealthily. He is very fond of Tanglewood, for he loves the various kinds of undergrowth which are allowed to flourish there, to the scandal of the community; and all through the nesting-season one hears his absurd call, a far more perfect imitation of a cat than any impersonation the mockingbird achieves, constantly about the yards and porches. His real singing is not unlike the mockingbird's; but it is briefer and harsher, and has rusty, creaking places in it, like a grackle's.

One day a pair of catbirds, reinforced by all the jays in the neighborhood, raised such a keen and protracted clamor that I stopped my work to go out upon the south porch and investigate. Putting aside the tall Japanese bamboos that waved above my head, I suddenly discovered a long, rusty-black snake coiled about the stems, his head thrown back and his forked tongue quivering within a few inches of my hand. Having disposed of him, we found what he was after—the nest of a catbird a little higher among the leaves, holding the dull blue-green jewels that had attracted his desire.

The catbirds disappear when their nesting-cares are over—slipping away as noiselessly as they come,

so that we seldom miss them until several days after they have gone. But another of our friends, the most conspicuous of them all, stays all the year through. This is the cardinal: for some months the most brilliant of all our voices, at others mostly silent, but always a gleam of that "pure color" which, Jefferies says, is "rest of heart." Like the thrushes, the cardinals have always loved Tanglewood. Never a year but one or more pairs have nested in the tall, untrimmed privet-hedge, or in the tangle of Cherokee-rose sprays that crowns the arch over the path. One year one of the male cardinals lost his gorgeous scarlet crest, on account of some singular affliction of the scalp; he was a pitiable spectacle as he came that winter to the feeding-shelf, of which, with the wrens and jays, he was a regular patron. The bald, gray, scaly patch was a painful reminder of his departed glory; but it enabled us that next summer to be sure that it was he who, with his still faithful wife, reared three different broods upon our premises. When we discovered him busily working over the third nest in the rose-tangle, the little daughter of the house remarked, delightedly, "Well! he surely must be fond of children!" We, also, were fond of his children, and glad that the race, at least, should not disappear from Tanglewood; for that winter, as we feared, carried him off. But still we warm our hearts at the living flames of his descendants; for, though their spring and summer song is a glory, it is in winter that I enjoy the cardinals most. How delicious, on a gray

morning, to hear the indescribably sharp, clear, decisive "'Tseet, 'tseet!" and to find there, on the shelf among the bamboos just outside my writing-window, the fierce little huzzar with his top-knot blown askew by the north wind, greedily but watchfully feasting upon my corn and bird-seed. Often his handsome little wife, in her soberer but no less beautiful dress, is with him; and she wears her top-knot quite as proudly as he. All winter long they come, growing more and more confident, until, with the passing of the cold days and the reappearance of the season of abundance, they gradually transfer their attentions from the feeding-shelf to the more seasonable attractions of the bird-baths.

The cardinal's song has been described as "a prelude—to nothing"; but I think it is a dull ear that does not find that gorgeous whistle its own excuse. For sheer, triumphant joy, for a pure challenge of exultation, I think there is no sound in nature to match it. And he is the first of the birds to become really conspicuous in the spring, to announce definitely that the winter is over. Soon after Christmas one hears his short, experimental note; before February is gone there comes the long, full, "*Je-hu! Je-hu!*" that marks the jubilant days of the early nesting season. He is in the flood-tide of his vernal ecstasy in March. Even the mockingbird's song, loud and piercing as it is, does not rise above the multitudinous sounds of the day like the cardinal's. It mingles with them, twining itself among them. But the cardinal's whis-

tle, no matter how many other birds are singing, soars through them all and takes the air for its own with its fresh, wild, poignant sweetness. Both birds are especially fond of singing in the rain. I remember one March evening, in particular, when that last flash of bronze sunlight out of a stormy sky came as wonder heaped upon wonder, to find the cardinal perched among the glistening new green in the cone-shaped black-gum tree, and the mockingbird on a rosebush near by, both singing gloriously. The mockingbird stopped presently; but for a long time the cardinal sang on through the soft and sparsely-dropping rain, to a low accompaniment of thunder.

Wren-music is a year-round luxury at Tanglewood. I have been waked by it even on a November morning. In the busy season, if you heed his excited "Hick, Hick, Hick, *Higgins!*" under the windows, you may catch a glimpse of his little striped profile almost any morning among the leaves; for it is the Carolina wren, with the distinct line above his eye, who is our guest. Every year finds one or more pairs building about the place; for several seasons in succession they built on a little shelf which seemed especially adapted to their tastes, between a brick pier and the timbers under the corner of the kitchen. They slip in and out of the hedges and the woodpile like lizards, or little brown mice. And they are among the best of our winter joys, for they grow very bold about the feeding-shelf.

The chickadees, those other tiny winter residents

who grow so familiar in colder climates, where the snow covers up their supply of weed-seeds, are self-supporting in our mild winter world, and do not condescend to avail themselves of our bounty. They are among the delightful transients who blow through our leafy places like a sentient breeze, leaving behind them a pleasant stir among our hedges and our thoughts. But their charming cousin, the tufted titmouse, is one of our familiar friends. He is not, I think, so well known as the chickadee, his breeding-range being from northern New Jersey southward, which is not the favorite gazing-range of the bird-glass. But he is entirely worth knowing; for he is a delightfully trim, gray, puff-ballish little fellow, with a round, bright eye, an adorable topknot, and a lovely wash of yellow under his slaty wings. Like the chickadee, he is much respected for his good work in destroying insect pests. He has no song, properly so called, but a very individual note, which one grows to love because of its association with his personality, rather than for itself. It is singularly piercing, persistent, and plaintive, and, like the bluebird's, curiously hard to locate. Like the bluejays, cardinals and grackles, he is fond of whole grains of corn, one of which he will carry to a solid limb near the trunk of a tree, and, holding it between his dainty claws, hammer it to pieces, jay-fashion, with surprising strength and energy. One rainy March morning I chanced to see a pair of titmice industriously stripping great beakfuls of moss and lichen from the bark of a big sweet-

gum tree. Knowing that it must be nesting material, I watched their movements and found that they had discovered a hole in the dogwood tree—a home with all the ancient improvements, ready to their hands. In my ignorance I wondered what there could be in such a wet, raw, unvernial day to inspire them with such a pleasant mania for nest-building. The next day the sun came out, and the growth upon the tree-trunks was quite dry, and much more difficult to remove. I saw and marveled. Oh, wise little builders! to recognize and seize upon the one day of supreme opportunity!

That year I observed and noted down all the details of titmouse housekeeping, sitting brazenly out in the front yard with my bird glasses and notebook, to the inexhaustible wonder of the passers-by. Both parents were most devoted and industrious. When the little ones were ready to fly, and the first baby appeared at the high window in the dogwood tree, I was unreasonably delighted. For he looked exactly as I would have him look; he was of the fluffy, not the naked type of infancy, which had so shocked me in the young mockingbirds and jays. He had the adorably woolly, innocent expression of a very young puppy.

Before the young family were safely launched, I had to interfere in their behalf against the jays, who attacked the noisy and excited youngsters like the heartless bullies they are. We at Tanglewood are of several minds about the jays. From long and inti-

mate acquaintance we know them to be brigands, cannibals and house-breakers. Once, after they had just broken up a cardinal's household and eaten a poor, naked baby or two, the edict went forth that they were to be exterminated. Air guns were brought into action. But it was a half-hearted campaign. Somebody would come upon a little heap of gorgeous feathers where some wounded freebooter had fallen, and say, "But they're so *beautiful!*" and then the prosecutors would weaken. Finally, during a summer of illness, I grew so dependent upon the jays that hostilities were definitely abandoned. They came to get corn from the little swinging shelves in the black-haw tree just outside the sleeping-porch; and I soon found that they were providing the chief occupation for the helpless hours. I am bound to say that I never discovered in my handsome visitors a single admirable trait of character; but bold and clever and beautiful they certainly are. One who has not watched them so, following them with idle eyes through the changing lights of long summer days, can have no idea of the beauty of their plumage. Their color, which we dismiss as blue, is really an uncatalogued hue between purple and dove-gray, with the sumptuousness of the one and the softness of the other. This is an inappropriate color for such a character, as is the soft, grayish white of his under parts. He has really only dots and splotches of proper blue. The jays are with us through the round of the year;

bits of brightness among the gray winter branches, and, in summer, among the boldest at the bird-baths. Better than the conventional bath, however, they like to join the pretty companies of mockingbirds, thrushes and catbirds who gather to revel in a prolonged shower when the hose is set on the flower-beds.

All these are common birds at Tanglewood: the inner circle of our familiar friends. There are others whom we can pretty confidently expect, on most years, for a little while. Among the most fascinating, to me, are the flocks of grackles who descend upon us just after Christmas, bringing, after you have greeted them for many years, a strangely stirring suggestion that the year has once more completed its revolution, and turns again toward the spring. Their communal voice, though unmusical, is most expressive—a sort of difficult, rusty cluck, which sounds as if their vitals needed oiling. The sound of a flock of grackles feeding together always makes me think of heavy wagon-wheels creaking over frozen roads. I love their sudden, startled flights—the whole flock hurrying upward like a cloud of black paper scraps whirled by the wind, to drop again like leaves—and the jewel-like green of their necks in the sun. The seemingly duller coat of the lady is almost as beautiful as her husband's, though she lacks the gorgeous iridescence that is his glory. But her sleek satin-brown, at once dull and rich, is surprisingly lovely in the proper light. However, it must be admitted that the individual grackle is an uncanny, a sinister being, with an evil

yellow eye and a stately, raven-like strut. Nearly every year there is a cripple or two among the flocks that stop at Tanglewood, some veteran of the rice-fields to the south of us. One year such a character lingered far into May, long after his fellows had departed—a strange old specimen, silently haunting the ditch at the back of the garden, startling the passer-by who chanced to glimpse his disheveled feathers and his staring yellow eye.

In February, if we are alert, we may always have a day or two of delight from the flocks of cedar waxwings who strip all the remaining berries, black and green and red, from their path to the north. I have had them bless and glorify gray, dreary February afternoons by holding one of their delicate orgies in the big hackberry tree, appearing promptly, almost to a day, year after year. They also love the purplish berries with which our privet-hedge is loaded; and this year, I am afraid, they will take our first holly berries—the only thing I have ever begrudged the birds! They are soft-voiced, exquisite, gentle little birds, with sweet, lisping voices. In manner and disposition they suggest the bluebird more than any other.

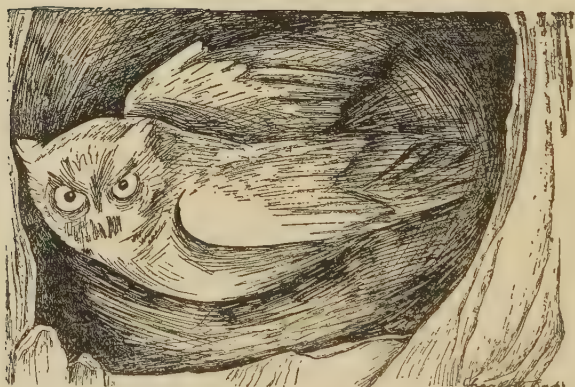
A completer contrast to these could hardly be imagined than the great-crested flycatcher, who, on certain years, descends upon Tanglewood and appropriates our April. He is a fine-looking, olive-brown fellow, with a distinctive, rounded crest, and odd, geometrically-disposed white markings. But his most individual characteristic is his voice—a kind of loud,

reckless squawk, like a half-crazy laugh, which he sends down at all hours from the treetops. He is very diverting—a sort of wild Irishman among the birds. Then there is the red-headed woodpecker, the tricolor, who drums cheerfully on our gables, bathes in our bird-baths, and charms us with his snowy flight, especially at wooing-time. The brown thrasher slips among our hedges; the flicker, with his neat pepper-and-salt suit and rich yellow-lined sleeves, thrusts his long bill methodically into our ant-hills; nuthatches and brown creepers and downy and hairy woodpeckers inspect our many tree-trunks. The orchard oriole tantalizes us with glimpses of his black-and-chestnut person, and sings an oddly intriguing song from the very topmost twig of the tallest tree in the yard. The yellow-billed cuckoo, locally called the rain-crow, glides through our cedars. He is to me one of the most appealing of all birds; he looks what the thrush sings. He is so elusive that it is very hard to get a satisfactory look at him; he is soft, shy, deliberate, with a sort of angelic dignity. He is indescribably elegant, long-tailed, and patrician, and there is nothing in the world lovelier than the cloudy white of his breast among the leaves. A much smaller visitor, with a different sort of distinction, is the Maryland yellowthroat, who suggests some tipsy reveller strayed from a fairies' ball, still wearing his domino in the broad light of the morning after. He should have been named the domino-bird. Kinglets and vireos come, and various sparrows, and humming-

birds—and even owls! It is quite a common thing for one of us to be awakened by a familiar hooting, or “talking,” or even screaming, over our very heads. Sometimes, of a spring evening, a Bob White will stop to whistle on the back fence.

The robin, that doorstep friend of Northern children, is so rare with us as to bring a thrill. During severe winters there are large flocks in our woods; I do not know why he who is so friendly within his nesting-range, should so avoid our dooryards. But at some time during the winter I am sure to see at least one or two of the glistening gray backs and ruddy breasts; and once in a while we have robins in the yard for a week or two. They always bring me delightful memories of other places where I have known them—of that Wooded Island in the lagoon that flows into Lake Michigan, or of the lovely Greek columns at Cheesman Park, where one sits and watches the agate profile of the Rockies, with the robins hopping like sparrows about one’s feet. Indeed, dearly as I love all the birds of Tanglewood, I confess to a human weakness for the transients—the darling pilgrims and strangers who flash through our trees and are gone, perhaps never to come again; symbolizing that splendor and that freedom vainly longed for by creatures without wings. The purple finches whom I have never seen but once; the scores of tiny warblers, small, almost, as hummingbirds, all brightness and motion and thin aerial song, who give me only tantalizing glimpses of their yellow or blue

or black markings; the red-start who spread before me just once his small flickering fan of rosy flame: these are the ones who keep me forever watching for some new and heavenly strangeness to drop for a moment out of the air. They are the rarer jewels among the birds of Tanglewood.





CHAPTER II

WINDOW LORE

FOR years we have maintained two lunch-counters for the birds, which are seldom left bare except for a few months in summer. They are usually provided with bird-seed, whole grains of corn, or corn-bread of the sort that Southerners call "egg-bread"—a substance which crumbles beautifully, and is especially relished by the birds. Through my long service in catering for them I had come to have many familiar friends; and it was something of a surprise, when I was called upon to spend a certain February lying upon a couch by the big north window, to discover how much my friendship with our guests had really lacked in intimacy.

Since they were quite used to foraging upon the window-shelf unmolested, while we sat or moved about within, it did not take them long to recover

from the shock of finding a face upon a pillow a few inches beyond the glass, and within a foot or so of the coveted crumbs. But at first they were startled, to say the least. A blue-jay would come dashing towards the shelf, his eye apparently upon the crumbs, his mind made up to alight; but, suddenly aware of the unusual presence, he would alter his intention, swerve in mid-air, and go on as if, after all, he had never really intended to stop. He did not have to look at me, I thought, to see me: that watchful, bright mirror of his eye included everything within its circle. The birds who approached and passed on in this way usually returned in a few minutes; and the elaborate caution of their approach, their fluttering retreats and nervous advances, took on for my fancy the character of a pretty, exaggerated comedy of conflicting motives. The comedy, of course, lay in the fact that the supposed ogre was really a charmed adorer, who could on no account have been persuaded to harm a feather. It was interesting, too, to watch the varying concessions which the different birds made to their fear, and their various ways of showing it. The white-throats, for instance, had a way of making numberless little darts and sallies, not even trying to disguise their panic-stricken indecision. One of their prettiest tricks was their habit of springing straight up into the air for several inches, at some fancied movement behind the glass; only to alight again in the same spot and resume their attack upon the dangerous edibles.

Individuals even of the same kind differed; it



seemed clear to me, for instance, that the lady cardinal was more aggressive and determined than her lord and master, and that the older whitethroats—distinguished by their darker shoes and stockings—had steadier nerves than the inexperienced youngsters. The boldest of all, I think—or rather, the most sensible and matter-of-fact—was the mockingbird. He would alight upon the edge of the sill, reconnoitre intently for a few moments, and then advance with comparatively unruffled front upon the treasure; and, having decided that it was worth the risk, he would stand his ground and gobble manfully, without the causeless vacillations and sudden wild alarms of the others. It must be admitted that he was also the greediest one.

The sparrows and titmice picked daintily about, usually, for crumbs of a suitable size; the cardinals chose large ones, and either broke them into smaller fragments by hammering them against the wood, or squatted meditatively upon the shelf and divided them with their bills by a process which I almost feel justified in describing as *chewing*; but the mockingbird simply picked up the biggest ones in sight and bolted them. Once, on a lazy summer afternoon, I watched for fifteen minutes a lizard which had half swallowed a big spider, and sat blinking, with all the creature's legs sticking out of its mouth, apparently waiting for it to die and stop objecting to being swallowed. I have seen a mockingbird on my shelf gulp over a crumb in somewhat the same way; and I have some-

times followed the course of one down his gullet, by the feathered ripple it created. He seldom carried anything away with him, as did many of the other birds, who were fond of triumphantly bearing off to a safe distance crumbs almost as large as their heads. Instead, he satisfied his appetite on the spot, and left when he was ready.

I may say that the wren, his small cousin, was even bolder than he; except that the wren seemed not so much bold as merely heedless and confident. He alighted among the crumbs with unsuspecting innocence and absorption; he never carried off his prize, but hammered and tore it into dainty beakfuls on the spot. He seemed to have little thought but for the business in hand, and for possible spiders in the crack between the shelf and the window-sill. Once, when he carried his inspection to the point of standing on tiptoe and peering through the glass straight into my face, he was indeed sufficiently startled by what he saw; the horrified flirt of his retreating tail all but convulsed me with a sympathetic shudder. For a moment I was almost afraid of myself, so intense and so contagious was his "registering" of shocked surprise.

Though I have spoken of their swift decisions on the wing, the birds did not usually approach from the level of the shelf. I had long ago observed that when a bird feeding on the shelf was frightened by some movement near the window, he almost invariably *dived*, disappearing instantly below the ledge, and

thus taking himself out of range in the shortest possible time. I now amused myself by watching the comically disrespectful effect of this trick at closer quarters, as the birds honored me with a last panicky but defiant glimpse of their uptilted tails. But I soon noticed that, in addition, they usually *approached* from below. I would see a green pennant of the bamboo near the window begin to shake as some little forager came hopping up the stem, and have time to say to myself, "Who's coming up the stairs now?" before the striped head and white throat-fan of a sparrow, the unruffled Platonic brow of a mockingbird, or the fiery, twitching crest of the cardinal, would appear above the sill.

As they grew accustomed to the motionless watching eyes on the other side of the glass, I was able to study many details of marking and expression which one is usually able to detect only upon a "bird in hand." This is a rare advantage: for the bird-books are full of tantalizing minutiae which fire the ambition and curiosity of the student; but a curiosity which is bound to go unsatisfied, if you regard your own desultory education as of less importance than a bird's life and freedom. From my pillow against the glass, however, I grew familiar with many tiny, endearing characteristics at no cost to my friends, except, perhaps, that of a few additional spasms of groundless fear. And, surely, a few spasms more or less cannot mean much to creatures whose normal condition seems to be a state of nervous tension so

extreme that a mere human being is exhausted just by imagining it. Besides, the strain of my presence clearly grew less from day to day, and they finally came to pay very little attention to it.

The niceties of what I may call facial expression engaged much of my fascinated study. My books, which are so scrupulously and vigilantly technical, do not describe a bird's eyebrows; yet I find that, for my purposes, many of my birds have them. My wrens, for instance (which the books brand as *Thyrothorus ludovicianus*—insinuating, moreover, that they *may* be, for all they know, *miamiensis* or *lomitensis* besides) have as one of their distinguishing marks what is ordinarily described as a white line over the eye. It is really a heavy blond eyebrow. It takes, in certain characteristic attitudes of the bird, a fascinating dip at the inner, and upward sweep at the outer, corner—a Mephistophelian feature which would give a look of *diablerie* to any creature less innocent and ingratiating. As it is, it merely adds another touch of charm to the demure, inconsequent, dynamic wren-personality.

The mockingbird has a much shorter and fainter blond eyebrow, ash-gray rather than buff, discernible only in certain lights and poses, but making then its contribution to the general suavity and urbane self-sufficiency of his expression. As for eyes, I should call the mockingbird's hazel; their mild light and color suit his unruffled breadth of brow, and the rounded impressiveness of his brain-pan, with its smooth, cap-

like covering of well-brushed feathers. In utter contrast to this decorous cap of the mockingbird is that twitching, mobile crest of the cardinal; there is to me something positively thrilling in its wild, swift expressiveness. Oddly enough, the lady cardinal's crest seems to me to have a different expression from her mate's. Difference of color accounts for something; the fiery, vibrating, upstanding fringe of the male inevitably suggests a plumed helmet, virile pride, martial pomp. But I have seen stout, efficient, stylish ladies, with hats trimmed stiffly up in front, whose expression was so exactly that of my lady cardinal when she goes a-marketing, that her crest can but suggest to me the type of female ascendancy which has always been a factor in the world, recognized as such long before feminism as a creed was ever heard of. But I am far from wishing, by my levity, to prejudice anybody against her. After all, if her husband does not mind her aggressive ways, why should I? Perhaps, as is often the case, they hide a tender heart. I have seen him hand her a whole grain of corn with his own bill, if I may so express it; and I have seen her accept it as gratefully as might any spouse who feels that it is her duty to be "supported." But usually, I have noticed, when he comes and finds her in possession of the shelf, he retires discreetly to an adjacent twig, and waits for his own repast till hers is finished. And if he reasons that her beauty more than balances any inconvenience he may suffer from

her decisiveness of character—why, I can but agree with him.

I had long suspected, and now I know, that her coat is really more beautiful than his own much-vaunted one. Seen at a little distance, indeed, there is nothing to compare with him—whether he sits in a black tree with a cold gray sky at his back, or burns in the deep green heart of a little cedar, or flashes across a “bridal-wreath” in full bloom. On my shelf he is still splendid beyond words, a living glory of scarlet and black; but she who, seen on the wing, seems but a quick brownish bird with a hint of bronze or olive, becomes at my window a veritable pearl of color. And, personally, I have an especial love for the sort of beauty that yields up reserves of loveliness to close inspection. It has always seemed to me that the sort which can survive the hard usage of familiarity should be very precious to a world that will not take the trouble to treat its beauty tenderly. Such is the beauty of my lady cardinal. No matter how hungry she may be, she never stays long enough for me to exhaust the satin-smooth surprises of her shadings and modulations, her delicate harmonies and unaccented contrasts. She blends a subtly changing beauty, as the varying lights play upon her, with a constant immaculate perfection.

There is another delightful crested bird, with eyebrows, who likes my feeding-shelf—the tufted titmouse. The titmouse is the only one of my half dozen

intimates who has a genuinely black eye. I used to suppose vaguely that the eyes of all small birds were black; but now I have decided that they vary in color, like people's. The mockingbird's, as I have said, is hazel: a dark pupil ringed by an iris of mild yellowish gray. Unless he is alarmed, its expression is rather gentler than that of most birds: a little like that of a domestic animal—a loved dog or horse. The brown thrasher who haunts the window on the other side of the house has a wild, unearthly, golden eye—a dark, small center with a wide, bright yellow ring. It gives him a singularly untamed, alien look, as of some distraught exile from the land of faëry—a little spoiled, however, by a touch of the hard, glaring opacity which characterizes the eye of a hen, and helps to make her such a stranger to the soul.

The other birds which I supposed to have black eyes—the sparrows, wrens, and jays—have, I find, brown ones. But the eye of the titmouse is true black, a dear, bright bead, a drop of living jet. His crest is as interesting as the cardinal's, as expressive and variable, but it quite lacks the cardinal's suggestion of aggressiveness and bravado. Its only boast is of sensitiveness and spirit: it is the mere innocent expression of a temperament so delicately buoyant and intense that it can but run to lines and points of hairbreadth fineness. Of all my window friends, indeed, he is by far the daintiest, the lightest of foot and wing—and the shyest. Sometimes, when he lays his little crest flat backward along his neck, as a mus-

tang lays back its ears, he has an unmistakably craven expression which might lead one to scorn him, if he looked older and stronger. More often, however, the crest sweeps upward with a delicate, swift pride from his black pin-point bill and his black jewel-eyes; and that is when he seems to have heavy black eyebrows which meet in the middle of his forehead. They give him a look of great intentness and mental acumen. He rarely stays on the shelf to eat his meal; he is one of those who, preferring peace of mind to labor-saving, take away as much as they can carry to the leafy leisure of their own green breakfast-rooms.

For two years past the whitethroat sparrow has been the commonest guest at our feeding-shelves. I was puzzled about him at first, for the bird-books describe him in his bright summer clothes, saying little about the sober utility suit which he keeps for travelling and winter wear. My first hasty glance took him for an English sparrow; next I noted the white throat, the one mark of his that is always clear and distinctive. At that point I apologized to him for overlooking the fact that he is lighter in movement, gentler in manner, and much more daintily made than his obnoxious relative. Then, every time I began to think I was acquainted with him, some bird-book would disturb me by mentioning some characteristic mark of his which I could not find at all. Pursuing one mystery after another from book to bird, I was finally afflicted, by one malicious little tome, with the addition of a mark that seemed the last straw—an alleged black

spot in the middle of the breast, which, up to that time, all my spying had failed to reveal. Then I began to find it occasionally—a most elusive hallmark, ranging from the vaguest suggestion of a blur on the soft, smoky gray, to a clearly defined and quite black dot. And, finally, all my puzzles were solved by the discovery somewhere of the simple statement that in midwinter the feathers grow dingy and the markings indistinct; but that, after the spring moult, the whitethroat becomes “conspicuously handsome in a family not distinguished for good looks.” Two or three times since then, just before their disappearance in the spring, I have been delighted by the visit of a beautifully dressed sparrow who had evidently arrayed himself for the social and conjugal activities of his summer heyday; and, indeed, one would not have known him for the same bird. The brown and grayish-white of the head stripes had become shining black and clear cream-white; the cravat gleamed; and the wash of yellow on his forehead—always, to me, the most exciting color in a bird—shone bright and striking.

The variability of their markings keeps my interest in the whitethroats always awake, in spite of their numbers and their growing familiarity. Nevertheless, I earned an **unintentional** rebuke from the other member of the household who most shares my idle study of the birds. Peeping over my shoulder and discovering the white throat-fan for the first time, she asked the bird’s name with sparkling eagerness.

"Oh," I answered, still following my own thoughts, "that's just a whitethroat."

"But he's pretty," she urged reproachfully, aggrieved that I seemed to slight him. And, after a while, when I had almost forgotten my chagrin, a thoughtful voice added, "Mother, I'd hate to be a '*just-a*'!"

Alas, how we all hate to be "*just-a's*," and how bent we are upon pushing each other into the hateful category! The wise man, Emerson says, wonders not at the unusual, but at the usual; and I am sure he also thinks of individuals, and not of classes and kinds. I made what amends I could, meditating the while upon the ancient problem involved. Privately, however, now that those reproachful eyes are off me, I hold that there is some excuse for being a little insensitive to sparrow individuality. Human beings, though they do not attain to anything like the same average of neatness and comeliness, are yet much more easily distinguishable. Certain birds have become to me unmistakably individuals: namely, the three cripples who frequent my window. Perhaps we establish our individuality for each other in somewhat the same sorry way—by means of some conspicuous misfortune or defect.

The first of my crippled visitors to arrive was a big blue-jay whom I named the Colonel; and it was through him that I first became interested in birds' heels and knees. The Colonel had lost a foot in some disastrous engagement of which I shall never know

the history, and, when I first saw him alight on my shelf and proceed to hop about on one foot and a stump, I felt a shock of horror and pity. But when I saw him leave the shelf, and felt the triumphant sense of buoyant security with which he entrusted his maimed body to those unscathed wings of his, I felt myself to have been informed that my pity was unseemly and superfluous. Besides, a blue-jay is not in any respect an appealing character; so, before long, the feelings with which I studied him were chiefly a lively curiosity and interest. And I was filled with wonder at the way in which he and his mother Nature had adapted him to his plight. He used his uninjured leg as do most perching birds: that is, the tibia, or part above the heel (which I then ignorantly called the knee) lay almost parallel with and against his body, usually concealed by feathers. But in the injured leg, which looked to be a full three-quarters of an inch shorter than the other, this part was habitually stretched down and straightened out, in order that the stump might be used as a foot; and the "heel" of the footless leg was correspondingly lower than the "heel" of the good one. He seemed to use it in this way automatically, and without effort or inconvenience; and doubtless it had long since become second-nature to him.

One of my other cripples was a whitethroat who had lost his two outer toes, so that the joint above bulged out to balance the inner ones which remained. His handicap was slight, and his deformity might

easily have been overlooked. But it served to identify him, and make him a person to me. The third was a titmouse, one of whose dainty little black claws was pathetically withered and useless. But he was such a weightless, vibratory little creature that one suspected him of having nothing under his feathers anyhow but a whistle; and one's pity was spared a little. Fortunately, a foot more or less is a small matter to a bird; the one irretrievable disaster would be the crippling of a wing.

But my observation of the Colonel led me to the discovery just hinted at, that a bird's heel corresponds in position to a man's knee, and that, in most common birds, the heel itself usually rests against the body, so that what we call the leg is ordinarily the part between the heel and the great toe! This is the way, I remember, that I used to construct the legs of the birds I drew in childhood—just two little marks, like sticks, that fastened the feet to the body. And that is the way most birds on my shelf really do look, in their usual positions—only the little marks should not properly be called legs. But the mockingbird often shows his whole leg, from tibia to toes. And that explains a characteristic I had often noticed without observing the reason: the upright, manlike pose of which he is so fond. He stretches up towards a vertical position, like a wading-bird: sometimes I have even seen his knees.

And I have seen something else. As he stood on the shelf, silhouetted against the sky, I have seen a

needle-point of daylight through his nostrils! I had discovered this phenomenon from my pillow before I chanced upon the information in my books that the birds who can afford you this spectacle are entitled to boast of having perforate nostrils. The distinction seems to be rather rare—most birds, I suppose, not caring to attain it, since they realize that the observer who would look through their nostrils can really see more by looking around them. I am even inclined to agree with them, now that I have long since abjured the pillow and the state of mind which it engendered. But, at the time, I was grateful to the mockingbird; this peculiarity gave him, in my eyes, much the sort of charm which the little boy who can wiggle his ears keeps for his fascinated contemporaries.





CHAPTER III

AN AERIAL HARVEST

IF angels use alarm-clocks, I am convinced that they are somewhat like the ones which, from March onward, ring through our sleeping-porch. If I were an overworked guardian-angel, in danger of sleeping too long on the job, I am sure I should "set a thrush" to wake me, whenever I turned down the corner of a cloud and went to bed. For no Big Ben is more piercingly insistent than the morning birds, once they are convinced of their duty to wake the earth; no "repeat" lasts half so long. First, the cardinal utters his wildly jubilant whistle, soon to be aided and abetted by the mockingbird, the catbird, and the wren. High above them all, from the first morning of his arrival in early April, pours the reiterated bell-tune of the wood-thrush; over and over, over and over,

as tirelessly as if he were indeed a bell that rings itself. Often there are new calls mingled with the familiar chorus; sometimes those of chance visitors whom I recognize, sometimes the sweet voices of passing strangers. Often I lie awake while the sun is rising and the misty grayness is lifting from the grass, and listen; I watch, too, with all my eyes; because in that fresh untroubled hour the whole bird-world is a-wing, and I sometimes have a rare chance to observe some new friend close at hand. It was at such a time, one morning late in March, that I first saw and recognized the hooded warbler. He came to the sweetgum which almost brushes the screen with its star-shaped leaves, and, unconscious of the service he was doing me, posed *en profile* for several accommodating seconds, while I printed the picture of his odd, unmistakable head-dress upon my brain. His yellow and black shone joyously pure in the early light; and beyond him the silvery veil of the rain, sifting through the thick new leaves, borrowed their color, and hung like a curtain of filmy green.

On the memorable morning of April 25, 1922, I had noticed as I lay awake after daybreak an unusual activity among the branches, with several glimpses of unaccustomed gold; but the real excitement did not begin until an hour or two later. I had been ill for a day or two, and was enjoying the unusual self-indulgence of breakfast in bed; but when the Man of the House had left for his office and the Boy of the House had gone to school and I was luxuriously

weighing the question of getting up, I was surprised to see the Ford turning in again at the big gate. This was such an unusual occurrence that I sat up, wondering what the cause might be. The Man of the House came around to the bedside, carrying a large, stout paper sack, such as they use in hardware stores. Without explanation or apology he spread a newspaper on the coverlet, and, while the Girl of the House and I looked on in round-eyed wonder, he emptied out upon the paper a great heap of tiny, dead birds! Soft and piteous and rainbow-bright, the spectacle took one's breath, as if one were inspecting a trophy from some new Slaughter of the Innocents. One of the birds was still breathing; in an instant it was cupped in a little girl's hands, to be transferred to a clean candy-box with a soft cotton lining. But the rest were past caring for; some were stiff and rain-beaten, some limp and smooth and still warm, but all were quite dead.

Any bird-student will appreciate the mingled intensity of my feelings. Once or twice, in the days of my early zeal, the Man of the House had brought down a specimen or two with his rifle for my inspection; but when the piteous little beauty lay in our hands, I was shamed by his unspoken compunction—even though the small haunter of the upper branches had been tantalizing us for days by his teasing call, and could now be identified with luxurious ease. The last was a red-eyed vireo, I remember; and vireos, because of the family restlessness and the family taste

for quiet elegance in dress, are maddening birds to differentiate. But I have never since then treated any bird merely as a specimen, or given any gun-bearing male an unholy commission to bring me the head of one on a charger. That was nearly fifteen years ago, and my education has since proceeded in the fitful and incidental fashion of him who confines his curiosity to the bird in the bush. I will not pretend that there have not been exasperated moments: occasions when the bird-books, like bored professors squelching a too-eager freshman, insisted upon dealing in inner quills and concealed crown-patches, when I had no data except an enthusiastic impression of olive-greenness. Imagine my sensations, then, fellow bird-gazer, when, after the first shock and spasm of pity had passed, I realized that I had, for my very own, two or three dozen exquisite little "specimens"—of whose death I was completely, even passionately, innocent!

I saw at a glance that most of them were warblers. With one new warbler a year, hitherto, I had been accustomed to think myself rich. I do not have a chance at them, generally speaking, except for a few days in the spring and fall. Most of them breed in Canada, and winter in South America and Mexico. They are a large family, including some sixty species. Individually, they are tiny; none of them larger than the English sparrow, and most of them about the size of a canary, or a little smaller. Many facts, besides the brevity of their sojourn, add to the difficulty of

knowing them. While a few feed on the ground, and many, during their migrations, dart about among the vines and bushes, most of them have a natural but tantalizing preference for tree-tops. All are quick and restless. So here, in my unworthy hands, I held more new species than I could hope to identify in the usual way in half the allotted time that yet remains to me for bird-gazing. For, as later investigation proved, there were fourteen different species.

Early in the night there had been a storm of rain and wind; and my husband told me that these birds were only a few of those that had been picked up by people going early to work. The streets and sidewalks were fairly strewn with the jewelled wreckage, especially near the street-lights. He had found my sackful in the hardware store, and, recognizing the richness of the find for me, had asked leave to bring them home. That day and the next were very strange ones. They had no parallel in the memory of the oldest inhabitant. My two or three fellow-addicts shared with me the unusual sensation of being, for a little while, part of a whole community of bird-enthusiasts. Everybody, I believe, loves the birds, but few have the patience to study them. This time the study was thrust upon them: a strange leaf torn by the storm from nature's book fluttered at their very feet, illuminated with colors bright enough to catch the least observant eye. In addition to the dead birds, my trees were fairly alive with the elfin warbler squeak, the thrilling warbler hues; and, besides, many

birds were picked up that were merely crippled or stunned. As I sat in the yard, bird-books piled at my feet, blissfully torn between the secure booty in my lap and the mocking, flitting riches among the leaves over my head, the telephone would ring; and when, in despair at the interruption, I would answer, it would be the call of more riches! Or somebody had found a little bird, too small for a bluebird, which yet insisted that it was one by being of a dazzling, iridescent blue: and what *could* it be? Christopher, the boy-of-all-work, came bearing a handful of bright feathers which proved one of my most satisfying finds: a yellow-breasted chat, which I had never been sure of, having confused it with the yellow-throated vireo and other flying daffodils. Charlie, the "yard man," casually mentioned that in "working out" a garden that morning he had picked up a double handful of little birds, and had left them in a pile on top of the fence—and he was sent back post-haste to bring them! This poor little batch of treasures, so nearly missed, looked so sodden and rain-beaten that at first I thought I should learn nothing from them; but when I returned to them a little later I saw that the sun and wind had been rapidly drying their feathers, which were showing all sorts of beautiful tints. One of my rarest and most exquisite finds came from this group: a female cerulean warbler, whose feathers, dried and brushed by pitying fingers, revealed a color-poem of delicate cream-canary and iridescent, filmy blue-green—the green of an elf's scarf or a butterfly's



wing. The peculiar delicate richness of this little jewel reminded me of the especial charm the female cardinal reveals to close inspection; and I am beginning to think that the superior subtlety of lady-birds is too little appreciated. This diminutive blue-green lady was elusive, too, in more ways than one; for she sent me scuttling distractedly back and forth among my handbooks, half-persuaded of more than one false identification, before I hit definitely upon the right one.

Through all that day, and the next, the excitement continued. At almost every home an old cage had been brought down from the attic to hold one or more crippled strangers. Cages were improvised in show-windows; all day there were wondering groups about them; birds were the chief topic of everybody's talk. Rain began again about noon, and continued intermittently through the night. After the street-lights were lighted, thousands of birds could be seen circling and darting about them like moths; and the air was full of their thin, unearthly music. Many times during the night I woke and heard it, coming with the oddest possible effect through the rainy dark. The night watchman told me that the streets rang like an aviary all night long. The next morning more birds were picked up; and though the main stream of migrants seemed to have passed by nightfall, the next morning found the trees still stirring with magnolia warblers, chats and vireos.

I had in my hands in the course of this strange



visitation some fifty birds, crippled, stunned, or dead. Some two or three kinds I failed to identify; but among the others I named nineteen different species. In addition, I made sure of five more on the wing, in the trees about the house, or along the roads and streets. Fully four-fifths of them had been wholly unknown to me, except in the books; or else my previous recognition of them had been tentative and uncertain. The redstart I had positively recognized in our trees only once before; but during these opulent days I saw pairs and single birds repeatedly. Oddly enough, though I saw the redstarts at different times, they were nearly always in one particular tree—the big water-oak which I call the Black Stag, because of the great branching antlers he carries with such a beautiful proud austerity, when he has shed his summer frivolity of leaves. I had made a gasping guess or two at the Blackburnian warbler on the wing; but now there were three Blackburnians recuperating in a cage in one of the show-windows. And what a jewel he is, with his rich head-fan of black and orange, and his flaming throat! I have already confessed that yellow in all its shades—from the pure daffodil-yellow on the throat of the chat, through all the shades of clear gold and green-gold and bronze, to the blazing flame-colored glory of the Blackburnian and the Baltimore oriole—is to me the most thrilling and exciting color a bird can wear. And after this experience, I am inclined to think that my feeling about it is the usual one. I found one or two people who

were most fascinated by the intense, iridescent blue of the indigo-bunting; and several wavered between the black-and-orange of the Baltimore oriole and the black-and-scarlet of the scarlet tanager. And, indeed, seen together, they do seem but two kinds or moods of the same primal, quintessential flame. This, one feels, is indeed the very fire at the core of things, flickering for a moment into the realm of the incredulous senses; that ineffable flame at which the soul forever scorches its frustrated wings. For me the rosy, flushing red of the summer tanager also has a peculiar fascination. And here again I found that whereas the plumage of the male dazzles, that of the female charms and softly surprises. Her subtle and delicious blending of the characteristic family colors delights alike the eye and the mind. After most of the excitement was over, a female summer tanager which had flown into a negro cabin was brought to me. It was then that, studying her at my leisure, I saw that while her general color was a rich, powdery gold washed with green—as of a sun-shaft striking through the boughs of a tree into a hay-loft—her underparts were touched and suffused with the blushing red which is her lord's prerogative. Since she seemed weak and exhausted, we put her into the cage which had just been vacated by the death of our last survivor, a Grinnell's water-thrush; and she ate eagerly of the hard-boiled egg which he had found an acceptable but unsustaining substitute for worms. But presently she began to droop, as he had done; and

knowing that she would surely die in the cage, we gave her a last chance by gently placing her, after dark, in the muscadine vine near the porch. But the little girl found her next morning, dead in the flower-border; and gave her, as she explained, "Christian burial" beside the others.

At the beginning of the migration we had brought down the idle butterfly breeding-cage from the attic; and at one time we had in it a yellow warbler (commonly called the summer yellowbird, or "wild canary"), the water-thrush, an indigo bunting, a black-throated green warbler, and a yellow-throated vireo. The little yellowbird, at first wet and draggled and dazed, soon began, as his plumage dried, to regain his flitting energy and his bright color; and by evening I had learned to love his open, child-like, innocent expression. He has a candid, ingenuous brow, and his very bright eyes are set unusually wide apart. In the evening he seemed so active that we gave him and the black-throated green warbler a chance to fly: the indigo-bird and the vireo had died early in the day, and the water-thrush had a crippled foot which made perching impossible, and obviously unfitted him for travel. The yellowbird was off like a flash; but the other warbler fell to the ground, and we picked him up and put him back into the cage. He was a beautiful little creature, suffering from an injury to his wing, which, however, did not seem to be broken. He seemed so bright and hardy that I hoped against hope that I might keep him alive until he

could recover. We gave him such flies as we could capture, fresh strawberries, and hard-boiled egg; and he ate and drank eagerly. When he began to droop, I went out and dug him several luscious, fat earth-worms; for the continued rains had brought them very near the surface of the ground, and the search was not arduous. Though he devoured them ravenously, I had misgivings; for I remembered former dog-days, when the boy and Christopher had prowled the yard, hoe and tomato-can in hand, imperiling my haggard, long-suffering flower-borders in a gloomy, unrewarded search for "bait." Besides, I seemed to remember that I had a few other duties, in addition to catering for the birds. My forebodings, as usual, proved to be pointless: my little boarders anticipated them by dying. The green-and-gold warbler gorged himself, then visibly drooped and wilted, and was found dead in the morning by the boy, who had adopted him for his own. (He had been at school when famine struck the cage.) Twenty-four hours later the water-thrush went the same way. Since both in their natural state eat worms and bugs, I know that the food we offered them was suitable. I suspect the mischief lay in the insufficiency of the supply, and in the feast-and-famine fashion in which it was provided. I can hardly think the confinement killed them so soon; for they did not seem to suffer any agonizing fear, and though they fluttered about at times, they did not struggle, or beat against the wire.

Among the birds brought to me, the most numerous species were the indigo bunting and the oven-birds. I was not surprised to find so many of the buntings, for I had seen little flocks of them in the yard, for a day or two previous to the caravan-catastrophe. But a curious thing was that, among a score or so that I examined, I found no female indigo-birds—at least none that I could identify as such. I long ago learned that the vagaries of winter plumage, and the transitional compromises between summer and winter wear, are especially designed by Providence, with the connivance of the birds, to cultivate patience and humility in the rash and ambitious. I am perfectly aware, for example, that when they find that they are approaching my beat, a certain number of the birds deliberately put on a winter overcoat with a new pair of summer spats, or an old serge traveling dress, dingy with the stains of many migrations, freakishly topped by a gorgeous new Easter hat. They do it just to mystify me. But, even with this fact in mind, I could not persuade myself that any of the indigo-birds were ladies. My best guess was that many were immature males; for blue predominated in them all, though often mottled with a soft, dove-like shade indescribably compounded of blue and brown and silver-gray. I have read that, in some species, the males and female travel in separate flocks; and I am left wondering if this is true of the indigo-bird.

The oven-bird was an entirely new acquaintance. I had passed him over in my books in a most cursory

and absent-minded fashion: possibly because I knew that, bird of the wet Northern woodlands, I was not likely to encounter him. But more probably it was because of the odor of burnt toast his name exhales, or because he inhabits the section of the bird-books marked "Chiefly Dull-Colored." I am not looking for any more acquaintances who are chiefly dull-colored; nor do I go to my bird-books for culinary associations. Now I found that—as is often the case when we undervalue plain-colored folk—I had made a mistake. He is a person worth knowing; and, considering the shortness of his visit, I became remarkably well acquainted with him. Not only did I have several dead birds in my hands, but, for two days, small flocks of oven-birds ranged about the yard as commonly and familiarly as sparrows. They are ground-feeders: an amiable habit, since it makes it easy to look down upon their distinguishing feature, the orange-brown crown-stripe. They are dull-colored only in comparison with other warblers; in reality there is no bird so plainly dressed but it will prove, when held in the hand and studied with a loving eye, a marvel of delicacy, richness, and beauty. The wood-thrushes were nesting in the yard, and, in my first bewildered haste, I took the oven-birds in my variegated heap for baby thrushes, from their general color and their spotted breasts. But a little calculation and a second look showed me that that was a booby's guess. The wood-thrushes had hardly had time since their arrival to take the dust-covers off last

year's furniture, to say nothing of populating their nurseries; and the adult trimness and smoothness of these little visitors had nothing to do with the endearing awkwardness and fluffy lack of finish which is characteristic of baby birds. Seeking next some distinguishing mark, I discovered the bright orange-brown head-stripe, and wondered that I could have overlooked it for a moment. It makes the name "golden-crowned thrush" very appropriate, as is that other unscientific but descriptive common name, "golden-crowned wagtail." The author of *Bird Neighbors* calls attention to the bird's comical and conspicuous manner of walking; it indeed suggests the name "wagtail," and is one of the most striking characteristics of the bird. To me, however, since I have never seen the true wagtail, it suggests rather certain little shore-birds which I have watched, teetering about the sandy rim of Galveston Bay: sandpipers and plovers, and that dainty and ridiculous bird-Pierrot, the black-necked stilt. The same author also quotes somebody, to the effect that the ovenbird's name is "trivial." I have already indicated that I do not like it; but I think, nevertheless, that it calls attention to a detail that is both important and interesting. Like the mockingbird's, it is an unfortunate name not because it is trivial, but because it is—as a name—irrelevant. A bird's common name, like a flower's, should call attention to the quintessence of the creature, if it be descriptive at all; and the quintessence of a bird can never be prosaic. "Mocking-

bird" is merely the superficial, lazy, prose name of that brilliant and elegant virtuoso; "oven-bird" is the prose name of this delicate thrush-like warbler. I have never heard his "luxurious nuptial-song"; but I have stroked his fallen golden head with my fingers, I have seen him teetering daintily about under my spireas; and I know that it was some scientist on a vacation who fastened the clumpy name of *oven-bird* upon him. The scientist, because he refrained from giving him a name of six syllables, describing his toes, doubtless thought that he was being wonderfully sprightly and imaginative. Another common name, "the teacher," was given him, I am sure, by some freckled boy playing truant; and that is much better, for it does describe his call. But best of all I like "golden-crowned thrush." For golden-crowned he certainly is; and all birds with spotted breasts are thrushes at heart, whatever the ornithologists may allege about femurs and mandibles. "Thrush" is a name to conjure with; and every bird with a spotted bosom has a right to wear it in private life, whatever official name he may be obliged to answer to. Far be it from me to speak slightly of the real ornithologists. They are indispensable and imposing creatures; but, after all, they are dependent upon the birds. If the birds had struck, and refused to be classified, the ornithologists would have shriveled and starved. The ravished lover of bird-songs, and wooer of bird-souls, need not be too much awed by his scientific betters, with their polysyllabic passion for bones.

The other warblers I met during this bird-storm, for the first time, were the magnolia, the Kentucky, the chestnut-sided, the bay-breasted, the Tennessee, the black-and-white creeping and the Belding yellowthroat. (The Maryland yellowthroat had long been a cherished friend.) I am not sure that I shall recognize all of these again, from the hasty glimpses which are all one can reasonably expect from a warbler. But most of them I shall, for I was able in most cases to select the one or two especial peculiarities which the trained and forewarned observer, if he can see the bird at all, can usually seize upon. I have an arrogant conviction that most of the bird-books (aside from the work of the few masters) are singularly inept in this regard, even the ones especially designed for use as field-guides. For one striking peculiarity is more helpful as an aid to identification than the most painfully accurate inventory of markings. Thus, one should be told that the catbird is, for the tyro, a mere swift-gliding, sooty shadow, *with a patch of bright chestnut under the tail at the base*. He should be informed that another bird (a slender, gray, long-tailed one, which shows no striking markings in repose) will twinkle into streaks of white when it flies—as if a fan of silver-gray satin were opened by a coquettish wind, disclosing slender, dazzling sticks of white. Armed with this information, an Eskimo could not fail to recognize the mockingbird. Some of the books do furnish these illuminating hints; but most of them are singularly stodgy and

morose. In this way, however, I marked most of my new acquaintances. Thus, the Kentucky warbler is easily confused, for the novice, with the yellow-throated vireo and the yellow-breasted chat. All three birds wear olive-green and daffodil-yellow; but the Kentucky warbler is the only one of the three who has no white underneath. Even his satin knee-breeches are canary-colored; and, if one is prepared, this is a point one can usually seize at a glance. Of the other two birds, the chat has no wing-bars; always one of the easiest questions to settle. Of course the chat is much larger, too, being the largest of the warblers; but they are all apt to play hide-and-seek with one's sense of proportion among the leaves. I shall know the male cerulean warbler if I can but glimpse his chestnut breast-band, however the sun may dazzle, however restlessly he may flit. During these strange days, a little half-stunned chestnut-sided warbler sat motionless for hours in one spot, in a part of the bakery-window which had been transformed from a rendezvous for pies into a temporary aviary. So I know that the casual and capricious patches on his Harlequin coat can never deceive me again if I can but glimpse that odd, primrose-yellow cap. A good many birds have orange or golden crowns; this is the only one I know which has a pale yellow one. It gives him an oddly babyish expression. Three other birds which, by means of rare, maddening glimpses, had tantalized and confused me for many years, were the Blackburnian warbler, the prothono-

tary, and the redstart; now I know that I must neglect the distracting glory of their wings, and fasten my agitated scrutiny upon their heads. That of the redstart is black, of the prothonotary plain orange, and of the Blackburnian, black and orange. The bird I now know as the magnolia warbler is another that has long been a source of mingled delight and despair. If my books, instead of fastening a prim and technical eye upon wing-bars and tail-coverts, had frankly said in the beginning, "Your reaction to this bird will be an ecstasy of black-and-yellow streakedness, succeeded by a gasp of white,"—how much I should have been spared! As it was, I had to hold a little storm-wrecked wayfarer in my very hands, before I could master his startling and intricate coloration. But the key to it is *streakedness*. During this visitation, he was one of the most numerous among the hundreds who stirred my trees. I sat very still in my chair under the cedars and let one hop toward me, all unconscious, from bough to bough, until he was directly over my head, and less than two yards away. His yellow breast looks as if his glossy jet-black necktie had faded and "run" upon it, in ink-black rivulets. Next to his streaked breast, the feature most easily seized by the eye is the large patch of white on the wing; and then the middle band of white on the tail, seen from below. And indeed I must admit that one reticent handbook had, in an expansive moment, confided this last detail to me.

On the third night from the one on which the birds

arrived, there came another terrific rainfall. La Banita, the usually mild-mannered little creek which in ordinary times murmurs an amiable way across the lower part of town, was transformed into a raging torrent, which played terrible havoc with all the little houses in the flat. One negro baby was lost; for the rest, furniture, clothing and provisions were swept away, little houses were washed from their foundations, bridges wrecked. A day or two later, Old John met the Man of the House on the street.

Old John is, by popular report, "part Indian." He used to accompany the Man of the House on fishing-trips in his Arcadian bachelor-days; he is therefore a peculiarly privileged character. Besides, it is a moot question whether Old John is in full possession of his faculties. So he is absolved altogether from the duty of being mannerly, and nobody takes exception to the carping, grumbling, disgruntled manner in which he habitually speaks. This time he accosted the Man of the House, and began without preliminary to discuss the storm. The gist of his remarks was, that the next time he told a lot of smart white folks that birds was "sent fo' a wawnin'," he reckoned maybe they would "pay him some mind."

The Man of the House solemnly assented; and when he told me that night what Old John had said, the centuries seemed suddenly to collapse like a telescope, bringing me very close to those old Romans who divined the will of the gods "from the flight of birds." After Rome had grown old and cynical, her

clever politicians, when they met, grinned at each other knowingly, "like a couple of Augurs." But there was a time when the Augurs with their *Auspices* (and the birds in their very names!) carried a fearful responsibility, striving to interpret the real and potent will of real and potent gods. And the rude, cloud-scanning men of those Etruscan times really knew something that tends to slip out of sight during enlightened and sophisticated periods. But it is something that will not stay forgotten. I cannot but believe that the peoples who rediscover it are the wisest peoples; just as the wisest man among us is he who has again dug out from beneath his glittering hoard of knowledge his first simplicity of heart.

I do not see the matter quite as Old John does; still, I share his sense of wonder, his jealousy for the primal mysteries, and his objection to the cocksureness of our ignorance. I like to remember that although a few fall (and, in falling, incidentally contribute a shining grain or two to my little pebble-heap of knowledge), a vast and joyous multitude pass by on the buoyant aerial highways every year; passing from lands that are to me but a glowing fable to other lands that are a snowy dream. I like to think of the invisible calendar which starts them so promptly northward; to imagine that mysterious skyey journey, whose plotting no man knows; and to reflect that our busy charts and schedules are but as the frayed edges of that mighty map. What a pity that so many come to grief against our arc-lights and light-houses!

I suppose it would be unreasonable to ask that the light of Knowledge be extinguished in order that Intuition may safely travel overhead. But steamships and birds are different sorts of creatures: why cannot Science and the Future put their heads together, and devise a way to provide for both of them? I, for one, demand a new kind of light-house: one that is clever enough to guide the steamships safely into harbor, but too clever to presume to meddle with wiser travelers. For, after all, the birds were finding their way about the world long before steamships were born.





CHAPTER IV

DOMESTICITY—WITH WINGS

DOWN the hill from West Windows stands a huge old elm tree. By stretching both my arms about its trunk, I can measure half its girth quite accurately. It has roots like the spreading arms of a throne, and a great leafy crown which grows all one way—to the south. It is the parent of a sumptuous thicket of saplings—hundreds upon hundreds of them: a dewy fastness where birds unnumbered find a green and serviceable heaven. Apparently, when it is seed-time in the world of elms, the prevailing winds in our valley are from the northwest; for, although the whole place is sprinkled with elm-seedlings, only on this side is there the dense growth of young trees which we call the **Elm Thicket**.

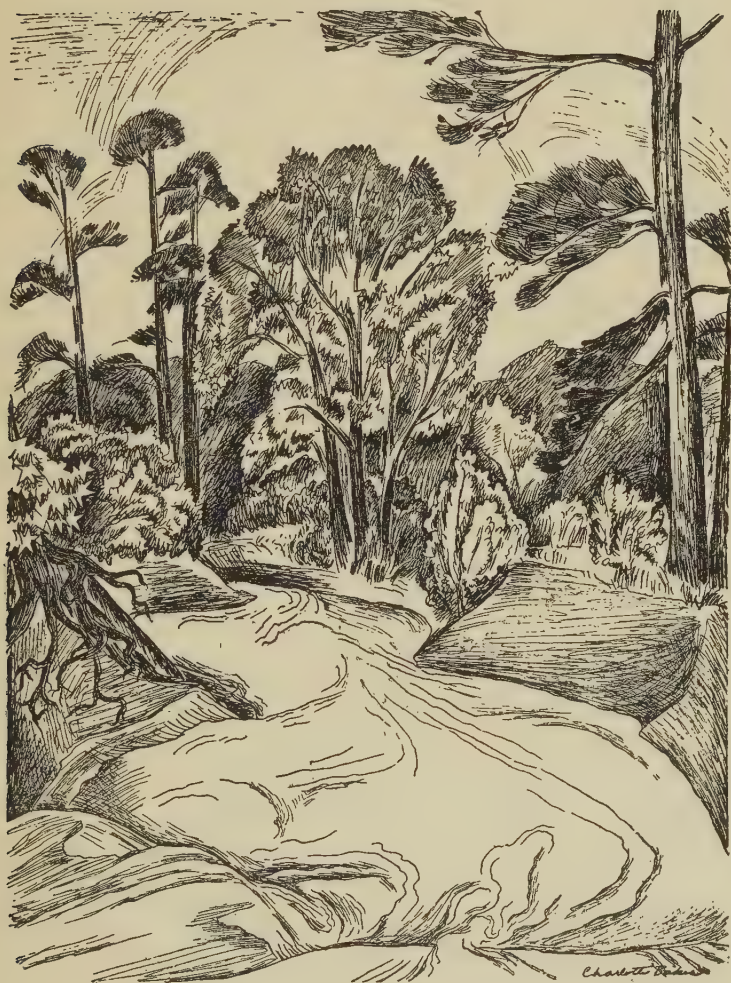
West Windows is the successor to Tanglewood. I

would not say that it has more birds than that other green haven of blessed memory, but I am certain that it has more kinds, and more varied facilities for nest-building. From the dooryard the land slopes back through the sassafras grove to the old elm, and from that point drops, still more rapidly, through an overgrown pasture to the creek valley. The roots of the old tree are in themselves an invitation to rest there, with one's back against the rough and friendly bark; to forget Time, as one gazes across the tangle of shrub and sedge and sapling to the wavy line of taller trees in the valley, where the creek—like a poetic gloss to a line of prose—meanders along beside the railroad. On the farther side the hills, partly wooded, climb slowly; they spread a sylvan back-drop of varied green, where blowing clouds and drifting smoke throw changing patterns of unheeded marvel, all day long. Beyond them, still, is the lovely line, gentle but full of awe, where the pine-fringed hills meet the quiet sky. For it is across that blue infinity above the pine-tops that the daily pageant of the sunset marches; and it is from its clear view of that august arena that West Windows takes its name.

One does not see it, however, quite so clearly, from the lower lookout between the roots of the old elm. Especially if the time be a breezy April morning, with swift alternations of sun and shadow, one forgets, in the flashing riot of sound and movement near at hand, those watchful depths of western sky. For, to the lover of green things and blossoming things and little

things with wings and fur, I can imagine no place of more bewildering riches than an overgrown pasture. For all I know, there may be such places: perhaps a tropical jungle, or some jeweled paradise among the islands of the sea. But for one whose adventures are scaled to the discovery of a butterfly's egg or a snatch of strange bird-song, a tangled stretch of long-neglected pasture, with a creek-bottom at its foot, holds more of possibility than is likely to be exhausted in the remainder of an eager but not very acquisitive lifetime.

It was on such a morning, not long ago, that I discovered the first mockingbird's nest of the season: and, in fact, the first one I have ever observed at close and convenient range. Indeed, in looking back over the memories and written notes of more than twenty years of bird study, I have been lately struck by the comparative meagreness of my records of domestic life. Certainly this has not been due in any degree to lack of interest; for my own ideal has always been precisely that of the birds: domesticity—with wings. It is due rather, I think, to the fact that the years in which I watched the birds most closely were also the years in which my own domestic concerns were most absorbing. In such a life come many free moments, but very few free hours. One who would follow closely the story of bird housekeeping, must consult the convenience of the birds. The rate of vibration in that world is much more rapid than in ours; the rhythm of the two domesticities does not synchronize. One



might run to the window long enough to note the thrilling markings of a new visitor to the feeding-shelf, and, an hour later, one might find time to hunt him distractedly through the bird-books, even unto a final triumphant identification; but one could hardly leave one's own baby in the bath merely because a commotion below the window announced that Mrs. Cardinal's babies were ready to fly. The haphazard and fragmentary lore that one acquires under such conditions would be nearly valueless to a really studious observer—to the sort of estimable person who knows when the first egg was laid and when the last baby hopped off, and has it all, down to the last worm, safely recorded and neatly labelled, in rows of little books. I have the rows of little books, but most of the labels are wrong, and the contents far from homogeneous. In several of them, indeed, the human nestlings—now fledged and flying—seem to have chosen to make impressionistic sketches of current events, or to keep the score of some exciting game, now long forgotten. Nevertheless, taking them all in all, they do record at least a visiting acquaintance with several of our best winged families. I look over them with due humility and pride. And, now that I no longer have the excuse of being domestic myself, and am forced to admit that nothing doth hinder me from being methodical except innate incapacity therefor and unconquerable aversion thereto, I embrace with joy my renewed opportunity to watch the house-keeping of the birds, unhampered, any longer, by the

guilty hankering to be painstaking and exact. I know, at last, that I study the birds, and butterflies, and the green, growing things, not to increase knowledge, chiefly, but to appease the hunger for perfection. In the nest-cupped jewel of a bird's egg, on the marvelous wing of a moth, in the shadow of a fern upon the drawn curtain of a winter's night, in a moment's Eternity shining from the eyes of lover or comrade—these are the things which illumine and redeem the "descent into matter." They have the finality of the perfect; the thirst of the spirit is appeased, for a moment, by these bright drops.

But no respectable rule should lack its exceptions; my single one is my chronicle of the titmouse household which I have mentioned in the first of these papers. That spring the whole family became interested in the tomtit builders. We named them Mr. and Mrs. Guppy; why, I am at a loss to say, except that I was re-reading *Bleak House*, and (as Adam is said to have replied to the inquirer who questioned the appropriateness of the names he had bestowed upon the animals) the little husband *looked like* "the young man by the name of Guppy." My record of his affairs is voluminous and exact; but even in that case I was late for a major crisis. I had watched them first, warm and dry, from behind the window-pane, while they bustled about enthusiastically in the cold drizzle, darting tirelessly from the lichen-covered roots of an old sweetgum to the dogwood tree by the front gate, which stood shivering in the rain, covered

with greenish-white, half-opened, most chilly-looking flowers. Later, I had sat for hours in the shade, through sunny May mornings, with book or sewing, the bird-glass at my side, watching the laden Guppys go in at the side-entrance of their home and come out empty handed at the front; for this commodious cavity was provided with *two* holes, some eight inches apart. Later on, unable any longer to endure the suspense of not knowing what was going on behind that taciturn house-front, I placed my ladder under the dogwood tree and boldly mounted. I was surprised to discover that there was nothing whatever to be seen, except darkness; the bottom was beyond human ken. But suddenly there was an alarmed note in the tree above me; and looking up, I saw the dapper little father, now the picture of alarm, with his topknot flattened back against his neck. He had a nutritious-looking larva in his bill, and his bright, pretty black eyes surveyed me with frank distaste and suspicion. I kept perfectly still, and he flew around from one limb to another, venturing nearer and then retreating, until he reached the very entrance of his house. He paused there, surveying me, and vibrating with fear; then, suddenly, he darted around the tree and slipped excitedly in at the side-door. A moment or two later he slid out again so quietly that I (resting my neck, and wishing it had the flexibility of a woodpecker's) did not know he had come up again until I heard him whir out of the tree. But still there was no sound from the nest.

About a week later, when the brief snow of white blossoms was gone from the dogwood tree, and Mrs. Tomtit's front door was set in screening green, I was standing below it when one of the parents returned with a worm in its bill. What was my delight to hear, as soon as it had disappeared within the cavity, a lively if somewhat muffled chorus of eager, anticipatory squeaks and chirps! It was the first time I had had a "realizing sense" that there was actually a family at the bottom of that inaccessible hole. It sounded as if there were at least a dozen. The parent was out in an instant, and off again in search of provisions. In about three minutes he—or she—was back, and the performance was repeated. I had to watch very closely, even when I sat near by with the hole in plain view. They darted in noiselessly; but their arrival was instantly greeted by that smothered acclaim from below.

A few days afterward, full of anticipation, I established myself again in front of the dogwood house. I was hardly settled before the most surprisingly fluffy little head, with monstrously bright eyes, appeared at the high window, squeaking lustily. He stayed there for a moment, eying me with candid but, I fear, disapproving interest, and then disappeared below. As for me, I could only gasp; he really looked quite too good to be true.

And then, after all, I missed the beginning of the grand exodus. While I was very busy in the house, I heard the most excessive disturbance out in front,

in the neighborhood of the dogwood tree. By this time my instincts were almost a match for Mr. Tomtit's in acuteness; and I realized with dismay what was happening. The best I could do at the moment was to send an indulgent brother out to make observations for me. As soon as I was free I hurried out; my scout reported five little ones already perched in the big maple tree near by, with one or two more still in the nest. And such a squeaking and squealing, such a general clamor of agitation and excitement! Just as I arrived on the scene one of the conservative ones scrambled up to the front door of his home, where he sat, looking out and protesting vehemently; against our presence in particular, and against the newness and unexpectedness of things in general. At about the same time another—the very last, as it proved—scrambled up to the other door, where he, too, wobbled and fluttered in a paroxysm of energetic indecision. But a movement of mine evidently dispelled the last lingering doubts in their young minds as to the wisest course of action. Both fluttered excitedly out upon the neighboring limbs, to find—to their evident surprise—that flying was a very simple matter.

For a few minutes the immediate neighborhood of the dogwood tree was the scene of great excitement. The titmouse children were almost as large as the parents, and were so noisy that the parental cries of anxiety quite ceased to be a means of identification. It was easy to distinguish them, however, by their

general air of inexperience, their fluffiness, and the mouse-gray shoes and stockings which replaced the conventional black of the adults. In a few minutes the brood was scattered; I was called into the house, and when I came out to find them all was quiet. They had passed through the trees like a breeze. All afternoon I watched for them, but they did not come back. I felt lonely for days when I looked at the dogwood tree.

There is another sequel among my stories of bird families; but this one came to light only the other day. One afternoon, soon after the "bird-storm" of 1922, I stopped on my way to town to look at a bird that hung on a porch close to the sidewalk. I was told that it had been found, wet and stunned, on the morning of the storm, and sheltered in the friendly cage until food and care had quite restored it. It was a beautiful male indigo bunting, darkly brilliant in its spring plumage, now that its coat was no longer drenched and beaten by the rain. I admired it and went my way; and for seven years I never thought of it. A few weeks ago, the little daughter (now quite grown up) of the household that had rescued the wayfarer, asked me if I remembered the little blue bird; and when I replied that I did, she told what was to me a strange story. About two years ago—and five after its capture—the indigo bird had been put into a cage with a female canary. Several times since then the canary had nested, but none of the eggs had hatched. In the spring of 1929, however, an egg had

proved fertile. A little deep-blue bird, exactly the color of its male parent, had hatched in the cage. As it grew older, the blue had begun to fade and disappear, and the little bird had gradually taken on the yellow and cream-white, streaked with a pale, soft brown, of the mother. When I paid my first visit, in the fourth week of its age, it looked almost exactly like the female canary. I could see—or fancy—a faint under-color of dusky blue; and, doubtless, a more expert observer could have detected other points of difference. What struck me, on the contrary, was the marked family resemblance between the strange parents—which, had I been wiser, would have forestalled my original astonishment. The shape of the bills of the two birds, in spite of their difference in color, at once told the story. A little meek consultation with my books reminded me that both the canary and the bunting belong to the finch family—a huge group which also includes the sparrows, the grosbeaks, and the proper finches. I was also interested—if chastened—to learn that our surprising phenomenon was by no means uncommon; but that canaries had often been crossed with sparrows and other finches, and that these ethereal hybrids were called by breeders *mules*. After that I perceived that even *oven-bird*, as a name, had not touched the depths.

Only a few days later, we had an invitation to make another most unusual visit: to a whippoorwill's nest. We accepted with alacrity; and after a journey of some five miles by car, we dismounted and cautiously

followed our guide into the woods. Suddenly, we flushed the mother-bird; there on the ground lay the pair of mottled eggs: in plain sight—but not, therefore, easily to be seen. Blanchan says that few common eggs are more difficult to find. Only once before had I seen them; and that adventure had remained for me a memorable one. On this first occasion it was my brother who had told me of the nest: the same accommodating brother who assisted at the exodus of the Guppys. Our Southern whippoorwill, according to the bird books, is really Chuck-Will's-Widow; his song has "one more syllable" than that of the whippoorwill proper, whose range is from Virginia northward. Nevertheless, I shall call him by his family name, that being the one by which I knew him throughout a childhood that was enchanted by his cry. I cannot describe my childish passion for that dusky wildwood strain. But I can remember it, and keep on remembering, until I can think myself back again into the swelling gingham breast of a little girl who used to sit on a rail fence in the spring twilight, during semi-annual visits to the country, the victim of that mysterious tragic rapture which she would not have bartered for any price, but which was almost more than she could bear. The whippoorwill to me then was not a bird: it was the cry of the soul of the world—or of that soul, at least, as it felt at early dusk on a country night in spring; which, evidently, was a very different way of feeling from that to which I should wake up in the golden-

green dazzle of next morning. Since then, of course, under the common necessity of endurance, one has hardened one's heart to the whippoorwill's cry, as to other cosmic sorrows; but not wholly. There is still a special regard for the shy instrument through which is poured that piercing wonder of the deep woods at dusk. So, when my brother reported that, as he and a companion were walking over a tract of timber, he had flushed a brooding mother-bird and found the eggs, I immediately challenged the proud discoverer. Could he take me to the nest? He replied that he believed he could—somewhat rashly, as I thought with secret amusement. For I had read that few people had seen the nest, both bird and eggs being among the final triumphs of protective coloration. I knew, furthermore, that the bird, when thoroughly frightened, has the peculiar habit of moving eggs or young: carrying either, in its enormous mouth, to another hiding-place. Nevertheless, I had at least so much faith in my informant's power that I gave him no peace until he diverted the better part of a busy day to the cause.

It was a vivid mid-May morning when we set out. Some five miles out from town we turned off from the highway, following a little sunny, lonely road which, in some places, was a mere lane between pine-skirted fallow fields; in others, it made a trail of its own through the woods, so narrow that the leaves almost brushed our faces. Throughout its length it was alive with birds. It was a sandy road, but there

had been a heavy rain the day before; so that the only difficulty it presented to the car was a multiplicity of stumps. We made many "a sudden sally" to avoid these, so that our track lay behind us like a snake's trail. Prickly-pears were in bloom in the sunny places; and in every clump there was at least one burly bumble-bee, his black velvet suit standing out in sharp contrast to the yellow satin of his blossomy banquet-table, with which his golden garters and buckles gloriously blended.

Our destination, as far as the car was concerned, was the Lone Star Church; from there we must strike out into the woods. We came upon it presently, shining neatly in a sunny clearing; a tiny white church with a tinier box steeple, below which, on a blue panel set over the door, was a brave, white-painted star! Just beyond it we left the car, and, taking only our field-glasses, plunged into the woods. I have never seen a more beautiful forest, even in East Texas, which is still rich in wooded country. In a few minutes we might have been a hundred miles from anywhere, for aught I knew of my whereabouts. The whippoorwill who had chosen this habitat, I thought, was running true to form: there were little trees and big trees, fallen logs and stumps and bushes and mats of creepers, and a dark-sparkling little stream, trickling far at the bottom of a small ravine, the walls of which were rich with moss and fern. I tried to keep my brother's white shirt in view, but my eyes would entangle themselves in the sun-shot, leaf-

flecked beauty all around me; once he strode clean away from me, eager as a dog on a trail, so that I had to call. At last he paused, baffled, and called back that he seemed to have mislaid his landmarks; and I chuckled to myself. But the next breath proclaimed them found again. We clambered down into the ferny gulch and up again; up a steep little hill; and then came suddenly upon a barbed-wire fence, all alone there in the woods. Beside it ran a faint path, a small, dim trail. Suddenly, as my brother forged ahead, a large brown bird sprang into the air with a swift noiselessness. The explorer stopped, in acute disgust. He had indeed found the nest, but, as before, he had come upon it unawares. He had believed it to be some dozen yards farther on.

We had hoped to approach so cautiously that we might see the mother-bird on her queer nest—which, considered as a nest, is a purely imaginary thing, like the Equator. But we knew the eggs were there, and advanced by inches. This time I spied them first—a pretty, delicately mottled pair, blending so perfectly with their surroundings that only the seeking eye could find them. Yet they were in plain sight on the bare pine-needles, without screen or protection of any kind, or so much as a sheltering hollow to lie in. Their color was a sort of translucent grey-white, mottled with deeper gray, which showed, in certain lights, a faint flush or undertone of lilac. After we had inspected them carefully, we withdrew to a little distance and established ourselves behind some bushes,

to hope that the mother-bird would overcome her fright and return to her nest. After about ten minutes, perhaps, she did come slipping back, and take her station upon a fence-post a few yards away from her eggs. But even the stealthy rustling we made in getting a better view, and in passing the field-glasses from hand to hand, presently frightened her away again. After that, though we waited long and silently, she would not venture again so near. But we had had a good view of her, and found her very like her picture in the bird books, which, alas, is not always the case: for some birds, like some persons, are not good "subjects," either for camera or artist. She is a large bird, of an odd build, especially heavy about the shoulders; and her general color is a rich, mottled brown. She has a dim, grayish-buff collar across her bosom.

I have spoken above of my after-dark feeling about the whippoorwill. But being, then as now, of an inquiring turn, I had a different anxiety about the creature in the daytime. When my boy uncle, sitting under the humming linden-tree in the drowsy noon, used to tell me that the bird really said, "Whip-poor-Will's *widow!*" I wondered and wondered why. Was it poor Will or poor widow—and why must the poor soul be whipped? I knew there was a story back of it somewhere. And when he added that the negroes think the bird says, "Chip-flew-outa-de-white-oak!" I was still more intrigued. And here, years and years after-

wards, motionless among the leaves near by, was the heroine of this ancient wrong, the victim of these "old, unhappy, far-off things," and I dared not venture a syllable of question. Again—though in a different way—it was almost more than one could bear.

Finally, lest the pretty twin eggs should grow quite cold, and so fail to yield either little chips or little widows, we took ourselves reluctantly away. One thing puzzled me a little. Why, after seeking the wildest of wild woods for her nest, should she have placed her eggs within six inches of its only path? Was it the same omnivorousness of spirit which makes one love to live facing a busy thoroughfare, and yet look out of one's back windows upon Eternity? Which makes one like to watch the box-cars trundling volubly along among the reticent trees, with their smoke-plumes twisted into tatters among the grape-vine tangles—and be glad that they are neither nearer nor farther? Whatever the reason for such inconsistent but stubborn preferences, I got no enlightenment that day from Chuck-Will's uncommunicative widow. And I suppose I shall get no more tonight, when one of her remote descendants, perhaps, shoots the willowy arrow of his cry up the darkening hill, across the overgrown pasture.

But to return, at last, to the mockingbird's nest which I discovered from the seat under the elm-tree. That discovery ushered in the most thrilling spring in all my years of bird-study. It was as if the birds, knowing that the casual and vagrant joys of our

many summers were at last to be gathered into the dignity and finality of a book, came flocking about to collaborate; to contribute, with a sense of gay responsibility for the joint enterprise, a note of richness and heightened authenticity at the close. Thus, the mockingbird chose for his home a little pine-tree directly in my line of vision, from my place under the elm-tree; and though I could not quite reach his nest on tiptoe, I was more than willing—as he doubtless knew—to carry the little ladder down the hill, even if the performance did look odd. I postponed my inspection for a while, for fear of frightening the nest-builders away; but when I did climb up and peer into the nest, I was rewarded for my self-restraint. For I found, not eggs, but babies; four of them. Their warm yellow skin glowed through the thick, cloudy gray down, as they stretched up four deep, wide-open, orange-colored mouths, which looked, in shape and hue, like gaudy, grotesque flowers, swaying upon their long gray necks for stems. The lady-bird had flown out, in much distress, and her mate joined her in agitated outcry. As long as I was there, one of them stayed in the tip of the little tree, only a foot or two above my head. I satisfied myself and came away quickly, in order not to distress them needlessly. A few days later, I discovered that another pair of mockingbirds had chosen a nesting-place even more convenient, from my point of view: a tiny elm-tree—hardly more than a bouquet of leafage—in the yard, within a stone's-throw of the back windows.

Mockingbird families, I find, are brisk and expeditious in the management of their affairs. The young ones seem hardy, and grow up quickly. The ones in the pine-tree were out and gone almost before I knew it; and the last time I looked into the elm-tree nest, the youngsters were so big that they were nearly spilling out of it. I was glad when they were safely launched; for much rain and wind were rapidly loosening the pretty structure, and making it insecure for such heavy nestlings. A third mockingbird mother was less fortunate. She built a beautiful nest in the fence-row down in the pasture, so low that I could easily look into it. I returned for two or three successive evenings to find only one egg. Fearing that something was wrong, I finally ventured upon a closer inspection, to find that the one egg had been punctured: probably by the bill of a marauding jay. Almost immediately, however, the mockingbird built another in a tangle only a few yards away; and though the pair scolded violently, I watched that brood until they were grown.

While I was observing this family, I decided that the cardinals must be building in the thicket; and, breaking my way into the depths of it with as little disturbance as possible, I found a beautifully finished nest in the crotch of a sapling, about on a level with my eyes. It contained two very young babies and one egg. They were too young even to stretch their mouths up for food: poor, helpless little worms, they seemed. But in a surprisingly short time they were

fledged and gone, and the parents were busy about another nest, the exact whereabouts of which they would not confide to me. The cardinals, I find, are not quite so fond of our new home as of Tanglewood. They are not shy birds (a neighbor tells me of a mother-cardinal who sits on her nest among the vines of the porch, where members of the household pass to and fro, hourly), but I suspect that, like the jays, they are fond of tall trees, and of deeply shaded places. For the jays, who were once our constant companions, are now merely chance acquaintances and passers-by. As usual, I hardly know whether to be glad or sorry. That stunning but ambiguous person has always had the power of shaking the bases of my opinions and confusing my standards of judgment.

It is interesting to observe how the preferred habitats of birds both vary and overlap. The catbirds, for instance, seem equally at home in both places. Certainly, in May, the catbird is the most conspicuous person at West Windows. He permeates the thicket; if I were not so fond of him, I should say that he infests the grove; he roams the front lawn tirelessly; and, the other afternoon, I came home to find him sauntering casually across the front porch. He has an almost indecent passion for mulberries; the two mulberry trees in the grove—one on our side, one on our neighbors'—are vocal with catbird cries through every daylit hour. The catbirds have built three nests, but have succeeded in rearing

only two broods. I am glad that the birds do not seem to suffer from these frequent tragedies as do we who watch them—or as we should, but for what seems the merciful obliviousness of the birds themselves. The tide of their vitality simply pours over a catastrophe, and into a new nest. I have found no clue to the fate of the clutch of blue-green jewels which seemed to promise a happy nestful in the western edge of the thicket. One day they were there, and a few days later they were gone, leaving not a trace—neither in the nest nor on the ground beneath it. This was such a clean robbery that I suspected small boys, rather than snakes or the never-to-be-trusted jays. I confess that my regret derived an added poignancy from the fact that they had been such beautiful eggs. I have never seen the eggs of the robin, which must be nearly, or quite, as beautiful; I know from the plates in the books that they are larger, and that their blue must be less tinged with green. But of the eggs that I have seen—not many, I confess—the catbird's are the loveliest; especially as they lie among the leaves, in their sylvan cup lined with smooth brown rootlets. It was hard to lose four of them.

An even more tragic loss was in store for me. One day, as I was making my way out of the thicket after a visit to the catbird's home, I came quite unexpectedly upon a new nest in a tangle of vines in the crotch of a sapling. It was an exciting discovery, for it was smaller than that of any bird I knew in-

timately, except the wren. It was somewhat more daintily made than that of the catbird; and, peering within, I was overjoyed to see two strange eggs. They were much like the mockingbirds, mottled gray and brown, but perhaps a third smaller. The first concern of my leisure, for the next few days, was to discover the builders of the nest. Beyond my wildest hopes my patience was rewarded; I found that they were among the most striking and delightful of my acquaintances, whom I had always longed to know better: yellow-breasted chats. From a careful distance, for the next few days, I watched the nest. I felt as if a flower had come alive and alighted on a branch in the thicket; I anticipated the joy of seeing the little daffodil-hearted mother sitting for hours on her nest, while I gazed my fill. But, alas! One evening there were three spotted eggs, the next there were only two. The parent birds seemed still to frequent the neighborhood; but no new eggs were laid. Then I realized that I seldom saw the birds, though I continued, now and then, to hear them. Finally I examined the remaining eggs, to find, as I had feared, that both had been punctured. A few days later, ants were crawling over the sticky, empty shells, inside and out.

The chat, in addition to the beauty of his coloring, is a most interesting, individual bird, with a variety of lively calls. He is hard to see, for he keeps himself well among the leaves, and his movements are at once stealthy and dashing. It was a relief to know that

another cause than my presence had driven him away. I shall not cease to hope that, like the more familiar birds, he will try again.

In a little thorn-tree in the fence-row, a few yards from the plundered mockingbird's nest, I had been for some days suspecting that a pair of doves were building. I had hardly dared to hope for such an honor; for to me few birds have the distinction, the romantic glamour, of the dove. It is partly a matter of immemorial association: she is less a creature of flesh and blood than a symbol; a flying emblem; an embodied idea. A cloud of sentiments and memories, profound, sacred, august, surround her like a nimbus. Then there is her call—her incomparable, tender voice. In its own way, it is as strange and moving as the whippoorwill's cry. And, finally, there is her beauty: the softness of her colors, the wild, clear-cut, sweeping grace of her lines, the swiftness and dash of her whistling flight. Seen against the sky or the leaves, she is like a bird done with three strokes of the pen; a bird cut out of stiff paper. It had been one of the first delights of the new place to find that the doves were happy there. But—to shelter a dove's nest on one's premises! I had kept away from the tree as long as I could; this evening I had to find out. The crotch where I suspected the nest to be was far out of reach, and set in an impossible tangle of thorns and stiff branches, above a barrier of barbed wire. But, by going around the tree, I could make out among the leaves and twigs something which looked

as if it might be the tail of a dove on her nest. It seemed impossible; particularly as I was moving about under the tree, and the object did not stir. True, it looked extremely like the characteristically long, stiff, pointed tail; but it also looked extremely like the broken end of a small dead branch. I peered at it from every angle, making no particular effort to be quiet; for I argued from the behavior of the mockingbird that, if the mother-dove had really been there on her nest, she would have slipped away at my mere approach. Finally, my desire to know got the better of me; I hunted about for a long dry weed-stalk, and tried to reach the twig. My poker was not quite long enough; I searched about and selected another. With that, stolidly and systematically, I actually succeeded in prodding the thing; whereupon, to my extreme astonishment, the supposed twig went whirring out of the tree! Seldom, in all my life, have I felt so crudely, crassly wicked. I realize, now, that I cast guilty looks about—to see, I suppose, if I had been observed by any passing hawk or rabbit. I felt myself, for the moment, to be on a level with the sort of person who might apply the term *mule* to the offspring of a bunting and a canary. Having poked a *dove* out of her nest with a stick, who am I to look down on anybody?

I should go on to record, I feel, that my punishment was stern and swift; but the gracious fact is otherwise. The lovely element in the Nature-of-Things that flowers into doves, evidently looked below

the crude performance to the passion of appreciation that partly inspired it. For not only did the impiously-poked dove return duly to her nest, but another built for us. In the midst of the Elm Thicket there is a lone cedar-tree; a shapely little citadel, looking serenely over the undergrowth to the valley and the hills beyond. It is in plain view from the grove; and as I sat there one late afternoon, I suddenly saw a brooding dove sitting motionless upon a nest a few yards away, which I had not until that moment suspected. A part of the tree she might have been, so still she sat. And I never visited the spot when she was not sitting there, motionless, apparently rapt in the intensest contemplation, gazing off across the valley. No disturbance dislodged her. It was a grief not to be able to follow that wild and gentle domestic cycle around its course. When I left home she was still brooding there, like the embodied concept that she was. But at least, though inconstant and unworthy, I had had a dove of my own.

In a hole in a dead tree, some thirty feet above my seat under the elm, a very different sort of a household established itself: beyond the reach of my prying, but not of my interest. For many days I was puzzled as to who these new householders might be. Woodpeckers of some sort, certainly; but it was almost impossible to make out their colors, seen at that angle against the sky. Besides, they were so stealthy that I could seldom catch more than a profile view of them. What was my surprise to discover,

after days of faithful study through the glasses, that they were my familiar friends and old favorites, the flickers! An astonishing fact was that they never once, while I was near, gave their familiar flicker call. Occasionally I heard the loud, rattling roll that is common, with variations, to many woodpeckers; but never the call that would instantly have betrayed them. The difficulty of watching them convinced me of the appropriateness of one of their common names, "high hole." It was worth the trouble, however, to gain a new point of view toward these handsomest and friendliest of the woodpeckers.

For every problem solved, the winged world supplies a new one; that is one of its abiding charms. I am sure that there are many nests in the pasture that I have never found. Dickcissel, the black-throated bunting, is a new acquaintance, with a fresh, pert, triple-noted song; he likes to sit upon a fence-post or the tip of a little tree, and tell me everything about himself except his present address. A pair of blue grosbeaks (a rather rare, dusky, Southern bird, a near relative of the cardinal) are forever tantalizing me with remarks about possible house-sites; and one field-lark sings every evening near a grassy door that I can never find. Most thrilling of all is a little bird which I had never seen until this spring. He is a tiny, flitting, sprite-like creature with a curly song, which, to my inexperience of the two, suggests the orchard oriole. He is the smallest but one of the finch family; but his breath-taking distinction lies in his coloring.

The most conspicuously colored of our birds, the books pronounce him; and I can well believe it. His head and neck are blue, his wings and shoulders green, his throat and underparts flame-red: and all the colors are of a burning, iridescent quality. He, too, is a Southern bird, and not very common. The humming-bird himself is not more of a jewel; it was a stroke of genius that gave him his common name, the *nonpareil*. He is supposed to nest in dense, thorny thickets; and somewhere about mine, I am sure, he has nested. If only one could find *that*!

Something almost equally wonderful I did find. Coming back up the hill one morning, after an hour rich with adventure in the pasture, I suddenly saw, not six feet over my head, and as plain as the sun, a most delicate golden-brown nest; and, rising above the rim of it, the soft, spotted breast, bright brown head, and still, watchful eye, of a brooding wood-thrush. Of all the birds that had particularly belonged to us, the wood-thrush had always been first and dearest. I had been delighted and relieved to hear them about the new place, and I knew they must be building not far away; but I had never dreamed of such good fortune as this: that they would set their house just above our heads, in the midst of our daily comings and goings, like a picture framed for our convenience and delight. How the nest was ever built without my knowledge, I shall never know; but there it was, absolutely perfect and complete. It was saddled upon a small horizontal branch, neatly and

firmly made, and of a lighter brown than that of mockingbird and cardinal; the materials selected were of the exact shade to blend with the cinnamon-brown coat of the brooding mother. She had even found a rag of white paper, weathered to the soft, cloudy color of her underparts, and had woven it casually into the most exposed side of the nest; so that, up among the shadow-dappled branches, only the shrewdest eye would detect it, or be able to distinguish branch from nest, or nest from spotted bosom.

And there, while we all watched with delight and wonder, the swift and delicate life-cycle was worked out. No birds that I have watched guard the nest so tirelessly and so closely. Until the babies were nearly grown, it was never left alone, so far as I could see, for an instant. During the brooding of the eggs, the father occasionally relieved the mother on the nest; more often, he fed her from his own beak. When I had been watching them for about ten days, I discovered one morning that a crisis had occurred; both parents were bringing worms. Still the mother-bird, for the most part, stayed at home; but once in a while her mate took her place. Long before I could catch any glimpse of the fledglings, the parents had adopted the custom of standing, usually, on the edge of the nest, instead of hovering the nestlings within it. I thought I had never seen a prettier picture than they made, standing there, side by side, among the leaves; but the picture was not yet complete. Presently there were three yellow bills upstretched—more

gently and modestly than those of the mockingbird children; and then three velvety cinnamon-brown heads. At last, the faithful and earnest little mother had visible difficulty in hovering the lively nestful. It was the very poetry of domestic comedy to see them nudging and ruffling her tender bosom (where all that secret of heavenly song lay coiled and hidden) for all the world like little pigs or little puppies—fairy-pigs, or elf-puppies. Comic, too, to see the industrious father, as the children waxed and grew lusty, coming home with great loads of provender: with earth-worms literally wreathed and festooned about his beak, like loops of spaghetti. And then it was that I saw the perfect picture—father, mother, and three beautiful children: all bright-brown and cloudy white, all with spotted bosoms, all daintily alert, all delicately wild and strange, even in their most practical moments of domestic intimacy. In their most aggressive moods, they never squealed or squawked; they were a noiseless family, throughout. For several days, the father would not even sing his evening song if I were near. I would hear him singing, and steal to my seat under the tree to listen; but the song would cease, and the singer slip away. Before many days, however, he consented to my presence; for a little while before sun-down, and a little after, rain or shine, he would take his station near his family, and pour out, softly, his bell-like song. Even so, at these times I could never quite find him. I knew that, if I did not sit quietly, he would not let me be one of

the family; so I kept very still, and merely knew that he was among the leaves above me, quite close over my head.

Thus, though I have at last gained the thrush as householder, I have not lost him as Idea. As I had realized long ago, he comes from the realms of things that "age cannot wither . . . nor custom stale." But, even if it were not so; even if, being human, I have bartered adoration for tenderness, exchanged a mystery for a friend, and left some heavy coin of dream, never to be redeemed, in the hollow of his root-lined nest; yet is life kind to the stumbling worshipper of wings. For there is no end to her surprises. Flashing at us through the high branches, shooting into our lives the gleam of a life so much swifter and intenser than our own, yet somehow native and familiar—there is always some uncaptured marvel. So, is there not still, for me, the *nonpareil*?



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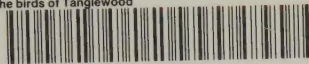
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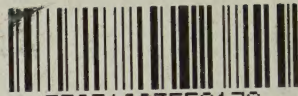
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